

A TOUR ON THE UPPER NORE

BY JOHN S. GIBB.

THIS SHORT summary is a record of visits to places of interest, archæological and otherwise along the Nore Valley from Ballyragget Bridge to Greens Bridge, during July and August, 1945. The higher land of about $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 miles on each side of the river, was taken as a boundary. This record is given as a continuous journey but many visits were paid to the various places.

Starting from Talbot's Inch a modern garden village, founded by the late Countess of Desart, on the high land overlooking the site of a house said to have been built by Robert Talbot, the builder of Kilkenny's walls. Part of the courtyard wall of this house is standing. An old workman who died about 30 years ago, aged nearly 90, told me that in his youth he had removed many flag-stones from a paved yard near this wall.

Going northward along the Freshford Road, on the rising ground to the east, is the Aut Even Hospital, built as the Village Hospital by Lady Desart and now owned by the Sisters of the Order of St. John of God. A little further along, the road forks and the old road is followed to Thornback. In the Cemetery, where many noted citizens of Kilkenny rest, are the remains of the old Church and Castle of Thornback. The church was dedicated to St. Brendan and the castle was probably built by either Troys or the Butlers. Very little remains of either castle or church. About 200 yards to the east is a very fine rath surmounted by trees. Retracing our steps about a quarter of a mile a lane, known locally as Fogarty's Lane, leads down to the new road and across to the river side, where stood a mill worked by the Franciscan Fathers, and still called Chapel Mill, portion of the walls of this old mill can still be seen. On the higher ground to the west the beautiful bog plant, Grass of Parnassus, grows plentifully in Hanrahan's bog :

“Parnassian grass, with chalice bloom
And globes nectareous, like the Earl's
Rich coronet, beset with pearls.

—Bishop Mant.

The road now slopes steeply down past a fine rock cutting of shale limestone to the "Rock"—a hostelry well known to followers of the gentle craft and others. The "Rock" takes its name from the Rock of Mount Eagle, a cliff about 100 feet high overlooking the meeting of the Nore and Dinan. A Rath crowns this eminence, while at its foot was the distillery of Mount Eagle, now also in ruins. Passing along the road on each side there is a rock cutting, showing good sections of a flaggy sandstone at a fairly steep angle. Continuing northwards and turning up the lane to the left at the foot of the hill, there is a rath, just a little past the crook of the road, on the north side. This rath is semi-circular and nearby is a limestone quarry from which the stone used in the building of the Dublin City Hall and Mansion House was obtained. The Munster and Leinster Bank in Kilkenny was also built of this stone, still used for building and monumental work by the local firm of Messrs. Gargan. Further along the lane, about a mile from the main road, is the Black Castle, the ancient home of the Rochford family. The castle is a ruin, its stones having been used for farm buildings, but portions of its walls and the courtyard boundaries remain, showing their loops and cross loops. The lane now narrows and rises steeply and is accessible only to the walker so that one must perforce return to the main road and continue along it to the Village of Three Castles. The road to the left at the cross is followed for about a mile to Tulla Church, erected in 1866, and of no great architectural merit.

A fine grotto has been built on the roadside opposite the Church. Returning to the village and the main road, at the next cross on the right are the remains of the three castles from which the village takes its name. They were built on the high ground overlooking the river and guarding the river crossing. The present Rectory of Odagh is built on the site of one castle, the lower storey of which forms the cellars of the Rectory. Facing the Rectory is the best preserved of the castles, which is now used as a barn. On the south side of this castle are the remains of the old parish church of Odagh, now almost in ruins and covered with ivy. Very little is left of the third castle in Mr. Hennessy's farmyard, and what is known locally as the high stable has been built over the ground floor. The vaulting of this castle is in very good condition. A small portion of the wall of the castle is on one side of the stable. Between these two castles is a very fine moate known in the neighbourhood as the "Mound." The moate was probably the first settlement of the Norman invaders and their home was built on it before the castles were erected. The Nore is here crossed by a fine segmental arched bridge and the northern parapet of the bridge is continued as a footpath for about 300 yards for use in flood times. The bridge was built in 1700 as a tablet on the south parapet



records. Near the bridge on a patch of boggy ground the Summer Snowflake is to be found in May. The road now turns sharply to the north-west and about a quarter of a mile along it, a lane turns off to the right or east and continues along by the river. This lane or road is very low lying and in the winter is generally flooded and impassable, especially at the Three Castles end. It is a very pleasant road to ride along, with a boggy flora, bog cotton, Dropwort, Hemp Agrimony, Loosestrife, Houndwort, Meadow Rue, Meadow Sweet and Bullrush, making a fine herbaceous border in late July and early August. Several small hogback bridges cross the various branches of the Nuenna river on its way to join the nearby Nore. Just before Lismaine is reached, the remains of Lismaine Castle can be seen on the opposite bank. This was a Purcell castle which was taken down in 1829, except for one corner about 30 feet high which stands stark and forlorn on its slight rise. The bridge is a high five arched one with nearly semi-circular arches. About a mile further along the road from the bridge is Rathbeagh, or the rath of the birches, the great rath of Heremon the Milesian, dating from about 1000 B.C. The rath is still almost perfect and is well worth a visit. Joyce mentions that Tuathal the Legitimate built a residence on the rath about 120 A.D. A farmer living near the rath informed me that local tradition has it that one of the King's resident on the rath coined his own money. A little further along the road in the angle made by the junction with the Clone road is the church and castle of Rathbeagh. The church was dedicated to St. Catherine and the castle was a Purcell one. Both are in ruins, part of the castle being used as a donkey's stable. Carrigan states that the church was rebuilt and I found worked mullions of windows used as ordinary building stones in the walls, so confirming his statement. Carrigan calls both Rathbeagh and one of the Three Castles castles presbyteries, but to me they look and bear all the marks of tower castles with a church added, probably later. About a mile further along, the road joins the Freshford-Ballyragget road, and about 300 yards from the junction is the remains of the old church of Grange-mac-Comb, only one gable almost entirely covered with ivy is left. An ornate vaulted tomb of the Stannards guarded by an enormous iron fence occupies the space of the old church. One wonders why they had been fenced in so securely. To the north of the church is a rath in a very good state of preservation.

An excellent road leads to Ballyragget and the River Nore is crossed by a long, low bridge, of eleven arches leading to The Square. Facing the Square is the Parish Church, built in 1842 by the Rev. R. Foran and enlarged and decorated by Dean Barry. The church is in beautiful condition, both inside and out, and bears all the marks of loving care and reverence. Turning southwards on the return road to Kilkenny, on the right hand side of the road

is Ballyraggett Castle. This castle of the Mount Garretts, built about 1485, was occupied until recently, but is now being allowed to fall into ruin. It is notable for its courtyard wall, which has a walk or alure along it about 9 feet up, the portion of the wall above being looped, while the corners of the wall had circular turrets. Another feature was the sunk bally or bawn, now used as an exercise ground for the North Kilkenny Hounds.

Just past the castle, on the opposite side of the road, one notices the fine blocks of new buildings built by the County Council for working class people, probably a better investment than the building of castles. The ancient church and burial place of Donoughmore, reputed to be one of St. Patrick's founding, is down a lane on the left. Only the three gables and portions of the wall remain, ivy covered, but many of the large blocks of stone of the early Celtic church are still in place. About a mile from Ballyraggett the road crosses the railway by a skew bridge. These skew arches are splendid examples of scientific masonry and are very soundly constructed; it will be a great loss if ever they are replaced by iron bridges. Further along the main Kilkenny road, past Georges tree, who ever George was (he crops up in many parts of the county), a road on the left leads to Conahy, and about 300 yards along this road is Foulksrath Castle, one of the best preserved of the Kilkenny castles, but for the last 15 years unoccupied and now slowly but surely on its way to ruin. It was probably built by one of the Purcells who got the lands from the De Freneys, a family name of the Freneys being Fulco or Fulk.

The castle has had its windows modernised in some places, but the work was so well done that only a close scrutiny reveals this. This castle might well be put under the care of the Board of Works for preservation. Foulksrath Castle has since been purchased by An Oige who have had it repaired and is now one of their most popular hostels.

Turning back to the main road and going forward towards Kilkenny, on the left hand is the classical gateway to Swift's Heath, a very fine triple entrance, but which looks just a wee bit out of place on an Irish country road. Still nearer Kilkenny and on the right, is Odagh Church, a plain structure with rather elaborate square tower, the symmetry of the plan being spoiled by a lean-to entrance porch on the north side of the tower. This graveyard has very few graves, the reason given by the sexton being, that the church and yard are on the solid rock, therefore a grave has to be quarried out. Continuing along the road the Jenkinstown Estate of the Bryans, now broken up into small holdings claims our attention. The ornamental cut limestone gate entrance, has been taken down and re-erected as entrance gates to St. Kieran's College, Kilkenny. The next place of interest is Ardaloo and this visit



entails a walk of about $\frac{1}{2}$ of a mile, down a lane past Mr. Breen's farm on the right. The lane leads past the old Polo Ground, now under a crop of oats and then by crossing several fields to the Church and Castle of Ardaloo. We had as guides three intelligent and entertaining children, two boys and a girl. Very little remains of either church or castle, one cannot even trace the plan of either. Our guides had a story about a large hole in the wall of the castle, that it was made quite recently by people digging for the gold buried there. Carrigan mentions a second church, but I could find no traces of it on this visit. The ruins stand in the shot or tongue of land between the Nore and Dinan opposite the rock of Mount Eagle, already noted on the outward journey.

Returning to the main road the hogback bridge of the Dinan is reached. A high three-arched bridge with elliptical arches, affording plenty of space for the flood waters of the Dinan to pass under. St. Patrick, by local tradition, is said to have had his feet wet by a sudden Dinan flood and to have put a curse on it, so that it is still known as the cursed Dinan. About a mile further on the road joins the Castlecomer road, where there used to be a forge, Henneberry's, with a horseshoe shaped doorway. Just before this junction a road turns off to the right, this is the Bleach road and should be taken, as it possesses more interest than the main road. Where the road passes under the railway, in a field on the left is a boundary wall, containing two arches near the base of the wall. One of the arches has been cut through to form a gateway. No information could be obtained as to the use of the arches. The road leads on to a large house known as Doyles. This house has only dummy windows on the road face and in the boundary wall is one half of an arch stone bearing the date 1604 from the old church. Just past Doyles on the left are the remains of Dunmore Rectory and lands. There seems to be, however, many traces of older work and again according to local tradition a monastery existed there. A portion is used as a ball alley and on the north a steep bank about 20 feet high is terraced to the top. No trace of the old church exists on the opposite side of the road. The road now rises and then descends a short steep hill with a right angle turn at the bottom which a few years ago was the scene of a fatal accident. The road here forks and a lane not much better than a path, leads to Dunmore Chapel on the main road, a small but neat church dedicated to the Holy Trinity. The church is in the parish of St. John, Kilkenny. Leaving the path to the right and keeping along the Bleach road, an old woollen mills in ruins on the right is passed with the long wood on the left and soon the Greenvale Woollen Mill, now owned by Messrs. Shaughnessy, is reached. The mill is built on the site of an old linen mill and the green fields and sloping bank to the south were used as bleach greens, hence

the name Bleach Road. On the roadside here grow white violets in Spring, while in a field to the left the beautiful Autumn flower Soapwort is plentiful.

The road runs on to Greens Bridge, a fine five-arched bridge, which I understand is doomed and due for replacement, as its hump shape and awkward angle to the connecting roads make it difficult for modern traffic. It was built about 1765 after the great floods which swept away the old bridge. Across the bridge along Green Street, to turn to the right and up Bishop's Hill. At the foot of this hill, a boreen to the right leads to a favourite walk along the Bishop's Meadows, passing the Seven Springs now being used to supplement Kilkenny's water supply. Keeping along the Freshford road the next place of interest is the New County Hospital recently erected. It is a magnificent collection of buildings splendidly designed and is meeting a long felt want in the City and County.

Immediately north of the Hospital and overlooking the river is Brannigan's Rath and a few yards further on Talbot's Inch is reached—our starting place.

The journey here described covers about 35 miles and is probably too much to undertake in one day. I made many trips in and out cycling about 200 miles and also doing a fair amount of walking. The whole valley is full of interest and to write fully about what can be seen would be outside the scope of this summary. The flora is interesting if not much out of the ordinary, of the two plants which in Ireland are only to be found in the Nore Valley, one clump of Autumn Crocus was seen near Inchbeg and the Campanula Trachelium was seen in abundance. Wherever I went people were very interested and only too willing to give information, and there appears to be much local tradition worth collecting and sifting. In conclusion I can thoroughly recommend a holiday task of this nature, as I have rarely spent so pleasant a holiday.

