

Ballyspellan Spa

By Miss G. Leahy, N.T.

THIS is to give notice to all gentlemen, ladies and others who have a mind to drink at the famous Ballyspellan Spa in the County of Kilkenny that the late dwelling house which belonged to John Blackman is now put in good order, fit to entertain persons of quality. There is very good fox and hare hunting, horse racing, dancing and hurling for the pleasure of the quality at the Spa." Thus was the Spa advertised in "Faulkner's Dublin Journal," May 25th, 1742. Even previous to that period it had been held in very high repute. Today it is just another relic of the past.

The spring rises out of a rock of brittle slate consisting of ferruginous argillite. The hill immediately above is of the same materials, accompanied to the north by siliceous shistus, but the hills to the south-east are composed of limestone. The water first collected on these heights and filtrating through their upper beds passes afterwards into ferruginous slate, at the further end of which it forms the Spa of Ballyspellan. It receives its carbonic acid gas from the limestone. This enables it to dissolve a small portion of iron in its passage. It exhibits evident signs of these two substances and very little of any other. When first taken up and held to the light it appears full of minute bubbles, which soon disappear. It is agreeable to drink, slightly acidulous, changes very little in temperature. The taste of iron is barely sensible in it. The spring never fails. The stones beneath are tinged with an ochrey sediment. Since its principal quality is carbonic acid gas, it loses same when exposed to the air and so should be drunk on the spot. It is said to lose its sparkling appearance when bottled at the spring, but regains same after some time.

Its effects have been made known by different authors. Dr. Taafe discusses its virtues at great length in a work entitled "The Irish Spa," published in 1724, but which is now scarce. Dr. Burgess also wrote an essay on the waters and air of Ballyspellan in 1725. He recommended it from ten years experience and observation in most disorders proceeding from obstruction and relaxation. He remarked its lightness and easy lathering beyond any mineral water he saw or heard of.

Dr. Ruty, the well-known writer on mineral waters, writes at length on it. He says that it is corroborative and good in obstructions of the viscera, drank from 2 to 3 pints in the morning. In its contents it appears to resemble the Spa of Kirby in Westmoreland and in its effects the waters of Pymont, Germany. He further states that it cures a variety of diseases which proceed from debilitated habits of the stomach, in the intestines and in the lungs. He observes its efficacy in recent dropsies, in eruptions, blotches in the skin, in a case of leprosy and in another of inveterate relaxation. It was most effective when used externally and internally and in obstructions of the liver and jaundice it worked wonders.

Visitors to the Spa generally resided at the village of Johnstown, about a mile distant; the ride from thence uphill may have contributed not a little to the salubrity of the water. Johnstown had in summer usually as many visitors as it could contain, and the water was supplied during the season generally to more than forty families besides those residing constantly in the neighbourhood.

The man in attendance in 1801 supplied in summer thirty-seven families, who paid from 5/5 to 11/4½ each. An attempt was made to build lodging houses near the Spa, this was not too successful owing to their bleak situation on the hill. However, their ruins may be seen at the present time.

Dr. Ruty continuing, says that the water passes through a rock of Irish slate, towards its exit. This slate may con-

tain a small quantity of sulphuric acid. He also remarks that the water exhibits no change with alkalies and that it becomes weak after a long drought, but on rain succeeding, it presently becomes stronger and strikes a deeper tincture with logwood.

When the Spa was in full swing the youth of the district and the adjoining townlands usually assembled there on Sunday afternoons. The field in front of the Spa house was then a sportsfield where all classes of sports took place, but this custom faded in the latter half of the last century, as the large influx of visitors also died away to a great extent at that time. Some twenty years ago an effort was made by the late Mr. Sharkey, Johnstown, to revive its popularity and to his efforts is due largely its present state of preservation. Today it is only used by picnic parties who learn from a slab inset in the wall that the water was once sold at 4d. and 6d. per glass.

Thomas Sheridan (1687-1738) a member of a famous Anglo-Irish family, and grandfather of the great dramatist, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, attended a lady hither who received benefits from these waters. His account of their effects agree with those of the other doctors. The following are a few of his verses of which there are eighteen in all.

BALLYSPELLAN

All you who would refine your blood,
As fair as famed Llewellyn,
By waters clear, come every year
To drink at Ballyspellan.

Though pox or itch your skins enrich,
With rubies past the telling;
'Twill clear your skin, before you've been
A month at Ballyspellan.

If lady's cheek be green as leek,
When she comes from her dwelling,
The kindly rose within it grows,
When she's at Ballyspellan.

The sooty brown who comes from town
 Grows here as fair as Helen;
 Then back she goes to kill the beaux
 By dint of Ballyspellan.

No politics, no subtle tricks
 No man his country selling,
 We eat, we drink, we never think
 Of those at Ballyspellan.

The troubled mind, the puffed with wind,
 Do all come here pell mell in,
 And they are sure to work their cure
 By drinking Ballyspellan.

Death throws no darts, tho' all these parts,
 No sextons here are knelling,
 Come, judge and try, you'll never die
 But live at Ballyspellan.

God cheer, sweet air, much joy, no care;
 Your sight, your taste, your smelling,
 Your ears, your touch transported much
 Each day at Ballyspellan.

My rhymes are gone, I think I've none,
 Unless I should bring Hell in;
 But since I'm here to Heaven so near,
 I can't at Ballyspellan.

Dean Swift, a great friend of Sheridan's, wrote "An Answer to the Ballyspellan Ballad." In a letter to Worrall of 28th September, 1728, Swift says : " We have a design upon Sheridan. He sent us in print a ballad upon Ballyspellan in which he has employed all the rhymes he could find to that word, but we have found fifteen more and employed them in abusing his ballad, and Ballyspellan too. I here send you a copy and desire you will get it printed privately and published."

Sheridan's poem was printed in " The Flower Piece," 1731, 1733. The manuscript of Swift's poem in his hand, accompanying the letter to Worrall is to be seen in the British Museum. In " The History of the Second Solomn "



Swift says that Sheridan took offence at his "answer"—it is against all the rules of reason, taste, good nature, judgment, gratitude or common manners.

AN ANSWER TO THE BALLYSPELLAN BALLAD

By Jonathan Swift

Dare you dispute,
You saucy brute,
And think there's no refilling
You scurvey lays,
And senseless praise
You give to Ballyspellan.

Lewellin ! Why ?
As well may I
Name honest Doctor Pelling
So hard sometimes
You tug for rhymes
To bring in Ballyspellan.

Howe'er you flounce,
I here pronounce,
Your medicine is repelling;
Your water's mud,
And sours the blood
When drank at Ballyspellan.

Where'er will raise
Such lies as these
Deserves a good cud-gelling
who falsely boasts
Of belles and toasts
At dirty Ballyspellan.

The pocky drabs,
To cure their scabs,
You thither are compelling,
Will back be sent
Worse than they went
From nasty Ballyspellan.

My rhymes are gone
To all but one,
Which is, our trees are felling;
As proper quite
As those you write
To force in Ballyspellan.

This poem contains 15 verses.