

From Tuam to Ballyspellan

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"Have you any idea of the shortest route from Tuam to Ballyspellan?" Thus wrote Archbishop Oliver Kelly of Tuam (1814-37) to Bishop Kyran Marum of Ossory (1815-27) in a letter of 24th April, 1820. A copy of the letter is to be found among the papers of Father T.J. Clohosey in St. Kieran's College, Kilkenny, in a folder containing copies in his hand of a number of documents from the Ossory diocesan archives. It was referred to by the present writer in the course of the archaeological society's visit to Johnstown and Ballyspellan Spa on 12th August, 1984. The original has not yet come to light.

The letter concerns a holiday that Archbishop Kelly intended to spend in Johnstown taking the waters of Ballyspellan Spa in response to the invitation of his friend Bishop Marum, a contemporary of his in the Irish College, Salamanca.¹ Marum's evident appreciation of the beneficial effects of 'taking the waters' of the spa is not surprising since he was a native of the parish in which it was situated, Galmoy and Johnstown parishes being then united, and he apparently suffered from a liver complaint.² Marum was actually born in the townland of Moneynamuck. His brother John was a large landowner there and in Rathpatrick.

Although his brother lived in the parish, Bishop Marum, while holidaying in Johnstown, probably intended to stay in the house of the parish priest, Thomas Brennan, one of the most able and respected priests of the diocese at the time. According to a tradition recorded by Canon Carrigan, Father Brennan used to let his house in Johnstown during the six summer months to "those who crowded to the Spa" and repair to the more peaceful surroundings of Steepleview House, Fertagh, the home of his predecessor Father John Cody.³

Ballyspellan Spa, of course, had long been famous for its waters. It is possible that its curative properties were known to the noble lady owner of the ninth century Ballyspellan brooch found in Ballyspellan in 1806.⁴ The spa certainly enjoyed wide popularity in the 18th century. In 1725, with the benefit of ten

years experience and observation of the spa, Dr. John Burgess published a work entitled *An essay on the waters and air of Ballispellan. With their various properties and uses, join'd with rules of conduct for the rich and poor in drinking the waters, and the proper exercises necessary there* and dedicated "To the ladies and gentlemen, who resort to the waters of Ballispellan for the preservation and recovery of their health". Writing in 1757, Dr. Rutty discussed the nature and benefits of the spa's waters at much greater length.⁵ In the meantime (1728) Thomas Sheridan and Dean Swift had their celebrated exchange of ballads on the spa with Sheridan taking offence at the abuse his ballad received at the playful if sharp pen of his friend⁶ Swift, it seems, actually had great respect for the waters of Ballyspellan, visiting it and urging his Stella to do likewise.⁷

Efforts were made during the century to improve the accommodation of visitors to the spa. A notice in *Faulkner's Dublin Journal* of 25th of May, 1742 acquainted "all gentlemen, ladies and others who have a mind to drink at the famous Ballyspellan Spa" that the late dwelling house which belonged to John Blackman had been put in good order and was now fit to entertain "persons of quality". This was probably Ballyspellan House, visited by Pococke in 1752 and said by him to lie about a quarter of a mile from the spa.⁸ For the pleasure of the quality at the spa, there was, the notice added, "very good fox and hare hunting, horse racing, dancing and hurling".

The most ambitious effort was that of John Hely of Foulkescourt, a grandson of Lord Chief Justice John Hely who obtained Foulkescourt and other lands from the Duke of Ormond in 1698. About 1770, at what was then known as Hely's Cross, he built the village of Johnstown. Planned on a spacious scale and with an impressive octagonal square, it was intended for the better accommodation of the many visitors to the spa.⁹ Hely's improvements impressed Charles Topham Bowden who visited there in the autumn of 1790. Yet the English traveller's account of the visit suggests that the spa's popularity was by then somewhat on the wane. for although he found the village crowded with "genteel people walking about the place", the surroundings of the spa itself were in a poor condition with the ruins of old lodgings and accommodations for visitors plainly visible and much of the road leading up the hill to the well



shamefully neglected.¹⁰ The visitor criticized the ill-judged policy of the inhabitants for having rendered the place more expensive than it ought to be, but he thought that “with proper regulations and the convenience of public rooms adapted to the general run of company, it could not fail to rise into importance”. Hely, however, had by then forsaken the ancient seat of his ancestors for the more congenial life of the metropolis where he died in 1803.

Ballyspellan Spa never regained the eminent place it had in the seventeenth century, but in the new century it did continue to attract visitors. In his *Statistical Observations Relative to the County of Kilkenny made in the years 1800 and 1801*, William Tighe noted that Johnstown had in summer “usually as many visitors as it can well contain”.¹¹ In 1820 Archbishop Kelly is to be found arranging a five-week holiday there, and the spa continued to figure prominently in publications on Irish mineral waters.¹² An editorial on Ballyspellan Spa in the *Kilkenny Journal* of 24th June, 1874 recalled that forty years previously the “healthful attraction” of the spa had brought “the rank and fashion of Kilkenny and the neighbouring counties” to Johnstown which was filled with visitors during the season.

As the century progressed, the number of visitors declined, but the waters retained their high reputation. In the summer of 1872, Archbishop Leahy of Cashel, still recovering from the stress and the strain of the first Vatican Council, spent some weeks at Johnstown and according to a correspondent of the *Kilkenny Moderator* (25th March, 1874) “was much improved by the waters and pure air of Ballyspellan”. His example, the correspondent added, was followed by other Tipperary folk. Dr. Thomas O'Reilly of Patrick Street, Kilkenny, informed the *Kilkenny Journal* of 11th July, 1874 that he was in the habit of sending patients of his there every year who suffered from chronic liver and other affections.

A determined effort was made to revive the fortunes, if not the “primitive glories”, of Ballyspellan Spa in 1874. A committee was set up in Johnstown for this purpose, subscriptions were taken and improvements were made for the benefit of the visitors and in the hope of attracting more. The letters and articles that appeared in the Kilkenny newspapers that year detailing the improvements carried out, highlighting the advantages of the spa, and listing visitors staying in the various hotels and guest houses in Johnstown, were part of this effort.

The *Kilkenny Journal* of 24th June, 1874 saluted the "happy signs of revival" of the spa and hoped that the races of Johnstown would also be revived. The campaign appears to have had some success, at least if one is to judge by the *Kilkenny Journal* of 8th July, 1874 which reported "a joyous assemblage of fully 1,000 visitors" promenading before the "Spa" house and a band from Clough enlivening the scene.

The revival did not endure. H Atcheson lamented the well's desolate surroundings in the *Kilkenny Moderator* of 27th January, 1892, and he reported that the local people attributed the spa's demise to a professional gentleman who was ill-treated or somewhat annoyed in the vicinity of the well and who used his wide influence to prevent the waters being as much appreciated as they deserved. Almost forty years later another attempt was made to revive the spa's fortunes, but with little success, as a long time resident of Johnstown, Greta Leahy, wrote in an early issue of this journal.¹³

The centuries' old custom of taking the waters at Ballyspellan Spa is now the almost exclusive preserve of the local inhabitants and others well versed in its once great reputation. These refreshing waters, the beautiful panoramic views from round about and the fresh invigorating air are now alas their little known privilege. There is no documentary evidence to show that Archbishop Kelly did get to share this privilege. He probably did. And it must be presumed that Bishop Marum, whose ancestors reputedly came from the banks of the Shannon, was able to indicate to him the shortest route from Tuam to Ballyspellan!

Tuam, April 24th, 1820.

My ever Dear Friend,

Your highly esteemed and long wished letter has at length come to hand. I am not unmindful of the promise I made of spending a part of the Summer at Ballyspellan Spa; and shall now state the arrangements I had made previous to the receipt of your favour, in order to be enabled to fulfil my promise, leaving you to appoint the time when we are to meet. The whole of the month of May and the twelve first days of the month of June are already appointed for performing a part of my Summer duties. From the 12th June to the 15th July I have left vacant for the purpose of drinking the spa and of enjoying your Society at Johnstown. I fear, however, that it

may not suit your convenience to put off spa drinking for such a length (sic) of time as I perceive by your letter that you consider the month of May the most proper season.¹⁴

If this be the case, I most earnestly request that you do not on my account, deprive yourself of the advantages to be derived from the water in that month. Should you allow the month of May to pass over without going to Ballyspellan, and that you should have made appointments that would not allow you to attend from 12th June to 15th July, I have only to say that from the 1st August to the middle of September, would be the next period I could with any degree of convenience absent myself. But I again request of you not to lose the month of May for my account, should you give it a preference to either period stated by me.

I am delighted to learn that the case of Morrissy has been decided at Rome to your satisfaction.¹⁵ It is to be hoped the decision will deter any other refractory members from attempting to give you future annoyance.

Cardl Fontana wrote to me some time ago to inquire into and make a report of the grounds of complaint preferred to the S. Congn by Marcus Lynch Esqr against his Bishop Dr Archdeacon.¹⁶ I summoned the parties to appear before me in the penultimate week of Lent and I had the good fortune to reconcile the contending parties without further reference to Rome. I treated his Lordship with as much lenity and kindness at least as I would have expected from him, were I equally in his power. We are now reconciled and I have reason to hope that he will be more observant of the Provincial Statutes in the future.

Will you have the goodness to write me a few lines with convenient dispatch stating how your health does and if I am to expect your Brother to this county.¹⁷ I cannot boast much of the state of my health although it is much better than it had been three weeks ago.

Have you any idea of the shortest route from Tuam to Ballyspellan?

I am my ever Dear Friend

Your most sincerely attached and affectionate
Oliver Kelly.

- containing an account of the waters of Ballyspellan, Castleconnel, . . . and of the spa lately discovered at Brownstown, near Kilkenny, . . .* Kilkenny (pr. by J. Reynolds) 1824; A. Knox, *The Irish Watering Places, their climate, scenery and accommodation*, Dublin 1845.
13. "Ballyspellan Spa", *OKR* 6 (1953) 18 - 22.
 14. The season ran from May to October; cf. *Kilkenny Moderator*, 23rd May, 1874.
 15. The sentence in Bishop Marum's favour had been issued on 17th November, 1819. On this long drawn out controversy see Carrigan's brief treatment in *History* I, 220; IV, 254 - 5.
 16. Bishop of Kilmacduagh, 1800 - 1824.
 17. Most probably Pierce, then parish priest of the united parishes of Kilmacow and Mullinavat; according to Carrigan, *History* I, 281, he was also a pupil of the Irish College, Salamanca. He died as parish priest of Freshford on 27th March, 1824 eleven days after the murder of his brother John at Knockshinraw, Galmoy.

Federation of Local History Societies

The Federation was founded at Rothe House in 1981. There are seventy-two member societies at present. It has two meetings each year. In springtime a seminar, and the Annual General Meeting is held in October. An interesting newsletter is published, and at the moment a pamphlet for "Founding a Local History Society" is available. The Federation has an accommodation address at Rothe House.