

## An Caisleán Mór

*SIOBHAN REGAN, Castlemore, was a runner-up in the recent Michael Kelly Awards Competition, sponsored by Roscommon Historical and Archaeological Society. Siobhan presented this History of her native area.*

"I was born in dear old Ireland  
The grandest place on earth  
I long to see the lovely place  
That land that gave me birth  
In a white wash cot  
A rosy spot with briars twining  
The grandest place in all those lands  
Is charming Castlemore"

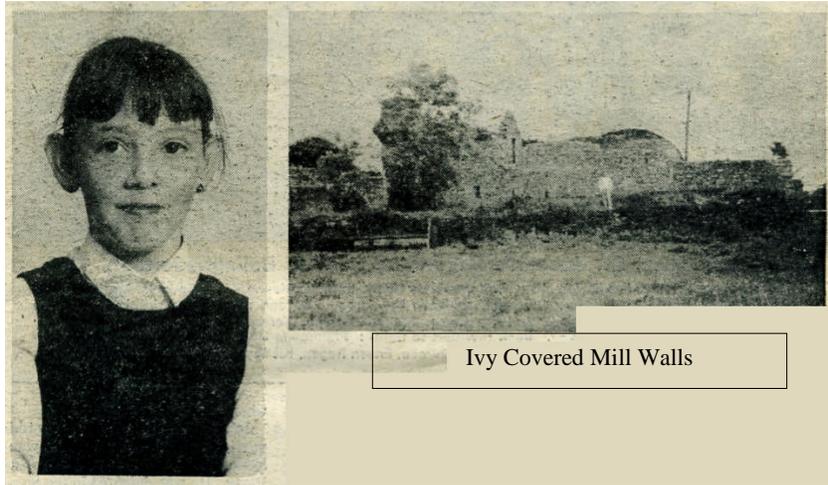
I live in historic Castlemore. It is a place full of song and story. Castlemore is situated about one mile west of Ballaghaderreen.

Castlemore is now a rural village of 12 houses. Most of the residents are farmers who now own their own farms. This was not always so. In the 18th and 19th century the natives did not own their own lands. They were merely tenants to the local landlords, one of which was Viscount Dillon, who resided in a stately home at Loughglynn (The house is now used as a Nursing Home).

I will go back in time and tell you what I know about my native place.

About the year 1159 many Norman knights were granted large tracts of land in Ireland. Two of these, De Nangle and De Burgo came to Connacht. De Nangle built a Norman Castle. To the natives it must have looked enormous, so it was called *An Caislean Mor*. We can presume that De Nangle and his descendants lived there for about four hundred years. During this time they probably became, as did other Norman landlords, "more Irish than the Irish themselves". During this period they changed their name from De Nangle to MacCoisdeallaigh.

Early in the 17th century when the Northern Chieftains, O'Neill and O'Donnell were marching to Kinsale they attacked *An Caislean Mor* and reduced it to ruins.



"A castle grand there once did stand  
But now its tumbled down.  
The mosses and the shamrock  
Are growing all around.  
The blackbird and the linnet sing.  
The lambs, they sport and play  
And among the trees  
You can hear the bees  
On a lovely summer's day."

After the demolition of the castle the MacCoisdeallaigh family built a large residence about a mile away from the castle ruin which included a small Catholic Church. From this stately mansion they could oversee much of their land and property.

The house consisted of approximately ten rooms, having two floors and a stone roof. During the penal laws the Catholic MacCoisdeallaigh family were ousted. The estate was administered by Viscount Dillon who appointed Thomas Strickland as his agent.

Thomas Strickland came from Derbyshire, England, and re-constructed the MacCoisdeallaigh house. He replaced the stone roof with a slate roof, added an extension, built an imposing cut-stone porch and built a range of farm buildings. He also planted eight acres of woodland, an orchard and gardens.

About this period the flax industry was thriving in the North of Ireland and Strickland built a flax mill near the ruins of the former castle.

### **The Mill**

The flax mill. was probably built in the later half of the eighteenth century. During that period the linen industry flourished in Northern Ireland. It was probably a branch of some firm already there.

The flax mill consisted of: (i) a tall chimney; (ii) two sets of sheds or "lean-tos" on the east and west sides of a very strong central wall; (iii) a mill-dam, a mill-race and a paddle type water-wheel.



The chimney and sheds were built by expert tradesmen. The masonry is far superior to that of the corn mill. The sheds on the west side of the central wall no longer stand. They were probably knocked to provide building material for the corn mill. Large cast-iron bearings are still inset in the central wall. These supported the shaft which was rotated by power from the paddle wheel in the trough at the end of the mill-race. This shaft supplied power to all the sheds.

### **The Tall Chimney**

The tall chimney was used to burn the "haulms" of the flax. These are the woody bark and straw of the flax

## Echos of Ballaghaderreen

fibres, The tall chimney carried away the large woody sparks until they were burned out. Otherwise they could set alight dry grass, or even the thatched roofs of nearby houses.

### *The Mill Dam*

The mill-dam was constructed half a mile upstream, as a reservoir to ensure an adequate water force when needed.

### *The Sluice Gates*

When it was necessary for the shaft to rotate, the sluice gates of the dam were opened and the water gushed through a mill-race, or channel, onto a paddle-type waterwheel. This rotating power set the wheels and shaft into action.

### *The Flax Crop*

Most of the flax was grown locally. In nearby villages there are low-lying drains or hollows called "the pits". These pits were used for retting the flax.

Flax seeds were sown in spring and needed conditions similar to that of oats. After one hundred days the crop was ready for harvesting. The flax was first pulled and tied into bundles to dry. It was then coarse-combed to remove the flax seeds. The bundles were then soaked in the pits for two or three weeks, until the outer woody bark rotted and became loose from the fibres. The bundles were again dried. Then a machine broke the woody bark into small pieces and separated them from the fibres. The long fibres were called "line" and the short fibres "tow". The long fibres were refined by machinery and were then ready to be woven into linen. This is why pure linen has irregular sized threads. The "tow" was spun into yarn and looked more like cotton material when woven. The linen yarn was probably sent to Belfast from Castlemore to be woven.

### *The Flax Mill Closes Down*

We do not know when the Flax Mill finished as an industry in Castlemore. Local folklore holds that husks from the flax polluted the river-water. This caused salmon mortality in Lough Gara, so the fishing authorities had the mill closed down.

From our knowledge of the Industrial Revolution we know that James Watt introduced a new source of power in 1765. The steam engine was soon to put the paddle wheel into decline. This would have taken several decades but we can assume that when the Belfast firms became more economic by modernisation the Castlemore branch became obsolete. However, the tall chimney has since sheltered many families of birds and has weathered the storms of perhaps two centuries. Today all that remains of the flax mill is the tall chimney and the walls of the mill.

"Castlemore it is lovely place  
There was always music there  
On a winter's night  
When the moon shone bright  
You could hear the piper's play;  
And when the pipes began to play  
See how they beat the floor.  
It was my delight on a winter's night  
To be in Castlemore."

### *The Corn Mill*

The corn mill at Castlemore was probably built in the mid 19th century. It was built to service an immediate need, that of producing oaten meal from the oats crop grown locally and flour from wheat.

### *Construction*

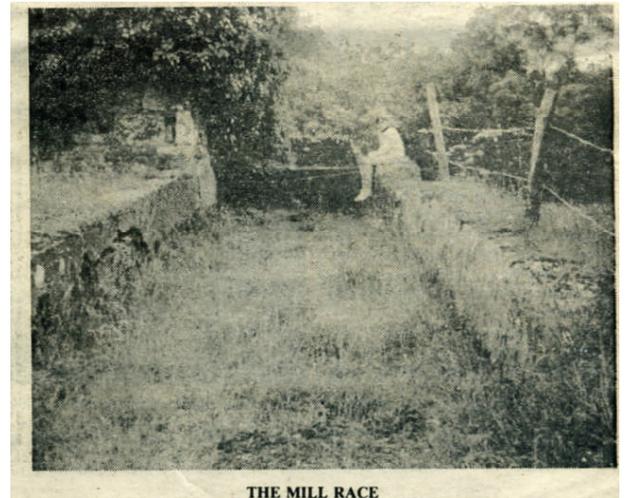
Part of the former flax mill sheds were retained for storage purposes. The construction was probably done by local goban craftsmen. It was built to the east of the flax mill and nearer to the mill-race.

### *Features*

The important features of the corn mill were: (i) drying lofts fed by an enormous vertical grain auger; (ii) an enormous horizontal auger which carried the dried grain to the grinding wheels; (iii) two grinding wheels about 5' diameter, 9" thick; (iv) the necessary wheels to carry

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power from the paddle water-wheel to the augers.



### *Owners*

The landlord's agents, Charles Strickland, William Blake and William Clarke owned and operated the mill until it was later leased to Stewarts and Farrells of Boyle.

### *Labour and Material*

The mill was operated by local labour on a seasonal basis. On occasions this labour was done by tenants as part-payment of rent. Much of the corn was grown locally by both agent and tenants. Farmers from surrounding towns as far away as Swinford and Castlereagh brought corn by horse and cart. They sold it or exchanged it for meal, as suited their needs. Being near the railway head in Ballaghaderreen made transport easier.

### *Operation*

When loads of corn arrived at the mill they were first weighed. The corn was then fed to the drying loft by the vertically encased auger. It was dried by means of constant moderate heat from a kiln underneath, by frequent turning and by fresh air. When adequately dried it was transferred to the grinding wheels by means of the horizontal encased auger. The grinding wheels can be seen to this day 5' diameter, 9" thick. They rotated in opposite directions. They could be positioned

in relation to each other so that the husks could first be removed from the seeds as in the production of oaten meal. When in another position, wheat could be ground into flour. Periodically the miller had to "lift" the grinding wheel so that the grinding surface could be roughened to facilitate the grinding process. This roughening was done with a hammer and steel chisel.

The meal or flour was they brought in a chute to where it was filled into bags.

### ***Change of Ownership***

Early in the 20th century William Clarke rented the corn mill to Farrells and later to Stewarts of Boyle. The Stewart family were highly skilled engineers. It was they who implemented water-powered electricity for the town of Boyle. The motto to their credit was: *"There were still gas lights in London when we had electric light in Boyle."* The Stewarts modernised the mill during their tenure. They installed a turbine which replaced the great paddlewheel. They replaced the beech-wood shafting and log wheels with steel shafting and belt-driven pulleys. This work was done by Belfast mill-wrights and was witnessed by the late Tom Geever when he was a small boy about 1905. These improvements increased the power supply. The mill could now also operate a sawing service. Trees were sawn into planks for construction. But the, older workmen' said *"The power was so great it shook the mill to its very foundations"*.

### ***The End of an Era***

As time passed other smaller mills began to operate economically in many towns. The electric and motor engines were less labour intensive. Gradually the water mills became obsolete and fell into decay.

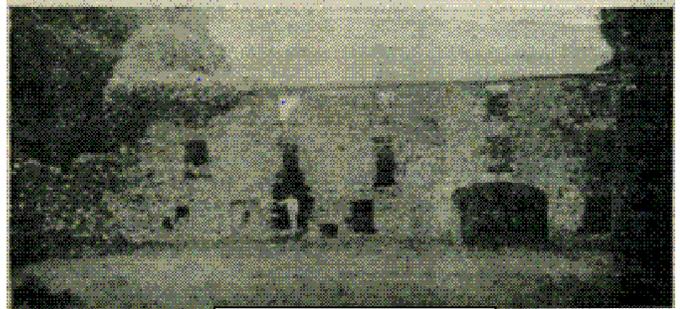
### ***A Place of Entertainment***

During the 1920s the drying loft was used as a Ceilidhe House. Jimmy Coleman, brother of the great musician Michael Coleman, often arrived by donkey and cart from Gurteen. He played jigs and reels all night for the girls and boys of the locality and returned home by dawn.

Through the years children explored the ruins of the mills, have gazed at the huge grinding stones and wondered if their ancestors ever worked there.

### ***Remains***

All that remains of the corn mill are ivy-covered walls. The Strickland House was demolished in the 1960s. The stones were used for the foundation of the Shannonside Milk Factory. All that remains is the sanctuary of the MacCoisdeallaigh Church.



The Ruins of the Corn Mills

"An now my friends  
I'm getting old  
And my poor heart is sore  
Come fill your glasses to the brim  
Until they do roll o'er  
We'll drink a health to all those lads  
Who left old Erin's shore  
O gra mo croi  
I long to see  
My charming Castlemore."

(This ballad of Castlemore is attributed to a member of the Feeney family).