

MONKSTOWN

“MONKSTOWN, a parish, in the half-barony of Rathdown, county of Dublin, and province of Leinster, 4 miles from Dublin on the road to Bray by Kingstown; containing with the town of Kingstown and the villiage of Blackrock, 9815 inhabitants, . . . is pleasantly situated on the bay of Dublin and comprises 1214½ acres of land, of which a large portion is in demenses and pleasure grounds.”

Thus was Monkstown described by Lewis in 1837 but the history of the parish begins many centuries earlier, probably as far back as the ninth century when a group of monks set sail from their monastery of Holmpatrick on an island off Skerries to escape from the recently landed Danes. Arriving near Salthill they established a church a little further inland which they named after their sixth century founder St. Mochonna. This church later became known as the Chapel of Carrickbrennan, remains of which may still be seen in the ancient graveyard of Carrickbrennan on the opposite side of the road to the Castle of Monkstown. The monks were protected in their new location by the local Celtic chieftain MacGillamocholmog who also gave them substantial tracts of land. After the Norman invasion in 1160 the monks were incorporated with the Cistercian monks of the Abbey of the Blessed Virgin Mary, situated near Mary Street in Dublin. These industrious monks were endowed with the lands of Carrickbrennan, Kingstown, Glenageary, and Bullock which they tilled and and farmed. Many of the native Celtic inhabitants had taken refuge from the Normans in the Wicklow mountains from where they made frequent and devastating raids on the monk's farms. To protect themselves and their livestock the monks built a castle at Monkstown with a tall lookout tower to protect their farms, and another at Bullock to guard their fishing industry.

In 1539 the act of Henry VIII for the suppression of all monastic institues was introduced and St. Mary's Abbey was closed. The Castle of Monkstown together with its lands was granted to Sir John Travers, Master of the Ordinance in Ireland, who used it as his country seat and principle residence. The Castle then passed through many ownerships, as varied in political outlook as in religious affiliation. Among these were



The 'Old' St. Mary's Church, Monkstown.

From *The Sentimental and Masonic Journal*, Sept. 1793.

at the close of the seventeenth century. The present church, dedicated to St. Patrick, was built in 1861.

The first record of a school in Monkstown parish is in the mid-eighteenth century. In 1767, the Bishop of Kildare, Dr. Jackson preached on behalf of the school collection and the sum of £70 was raised. The present schoolhouse was built shortly afterwards in 1791, and at the turn of the century it was given laudatory if somewhat banal mention in the poem "On the Rock, Near Dublin" in *Walker's Magazine* (Sept. 1800. p. 182).

*"If we desire to see the children's friend
To Monkstown School our willing steps we bend:
There decency and industry prevail,
Saving the poor from hospital and jail;
There godlike charity has fix'd her reign,
Her blest abode; — nor can we ask in vain;
The terms of charity are never hard,
Love and compassion are their own reward;
The soul which succours modest worth distress,
Can with itself enjoy a noble feast."*

In 1834 there is reference to a school in Monkstown attended by 205 pupils, and supported by an allowance of £12 from the National board, and £8 from the Roman Catholic clergyman. We are also told of another school maintained by private subscription "near the church" attended by about ninety children of both sexes, and this reference is probably to the present school.

Three years later in 1837, the educational facilities in the parish seem to have expanded for we learn of 780 children attending five public schools, of which the parochial and infants school are supported by subscription, and two under the new Board of Education were aided by annual donations from the Catholic clergy. There was at this time also a private school attended by sixty children.

In the nineteenth century two major developments were to have far reaching effects on Monkstown and its environs — the building of Dun Laoghaire harbour, and the construction of the railway. The area which had once been relatively inaccessible was now put within easy reach of the city of Dublin, and the harbour attracted many visitors from overseas. The harbour owes its existence to a terrible maritime tragedy at Seapoint on November 17th 1807. On the previous day a number of transport ships departed from the Pidgeon house for Liverpool



The 'New' St. Mary's Church, Monkstown.
Built to the design of John Semple in 1831.

Photograph by kind permission of David Davison.

with army officers, their wives, some passengers and many volunteers aboard. Among these were the ill-fated *Prince of Wales* and the *Rochdale* which were forced back by a fierce gale. They were unable to regain the harbour, and lost their bearings completely in one of the fiercest snow storms ever seen. The event is described in *Walker's Magazine*:

"The first misfortune, it appears happened to the *Prince of Wales*, which about 11 at night, struck on the rocks near Seapoint boarding house, and went to the bottom with *one hundred and twenty* souls on board, mostly recruits for the 18th regiment, in the care of Lieutenant M'Clean of that corps, who shared the melancholy fate of his brother soldiers . . . The second in this melancholy list, appears to have been the *Rochdale* transport, of Liverpool, on board of which, we believe, was the staff of the 97th regiment. Though she had been observed in the offing late on Thursday evening . . . Friday morning exhibited her alongside the tower a complete wreck, her bottom bulged, and the sea making free passage over her. On board of this ill-fated vessel, we regret to state, there were no less than *two hundred and sixty five* (some accounts add two more) all of whom were swallowed up by the merciless element."

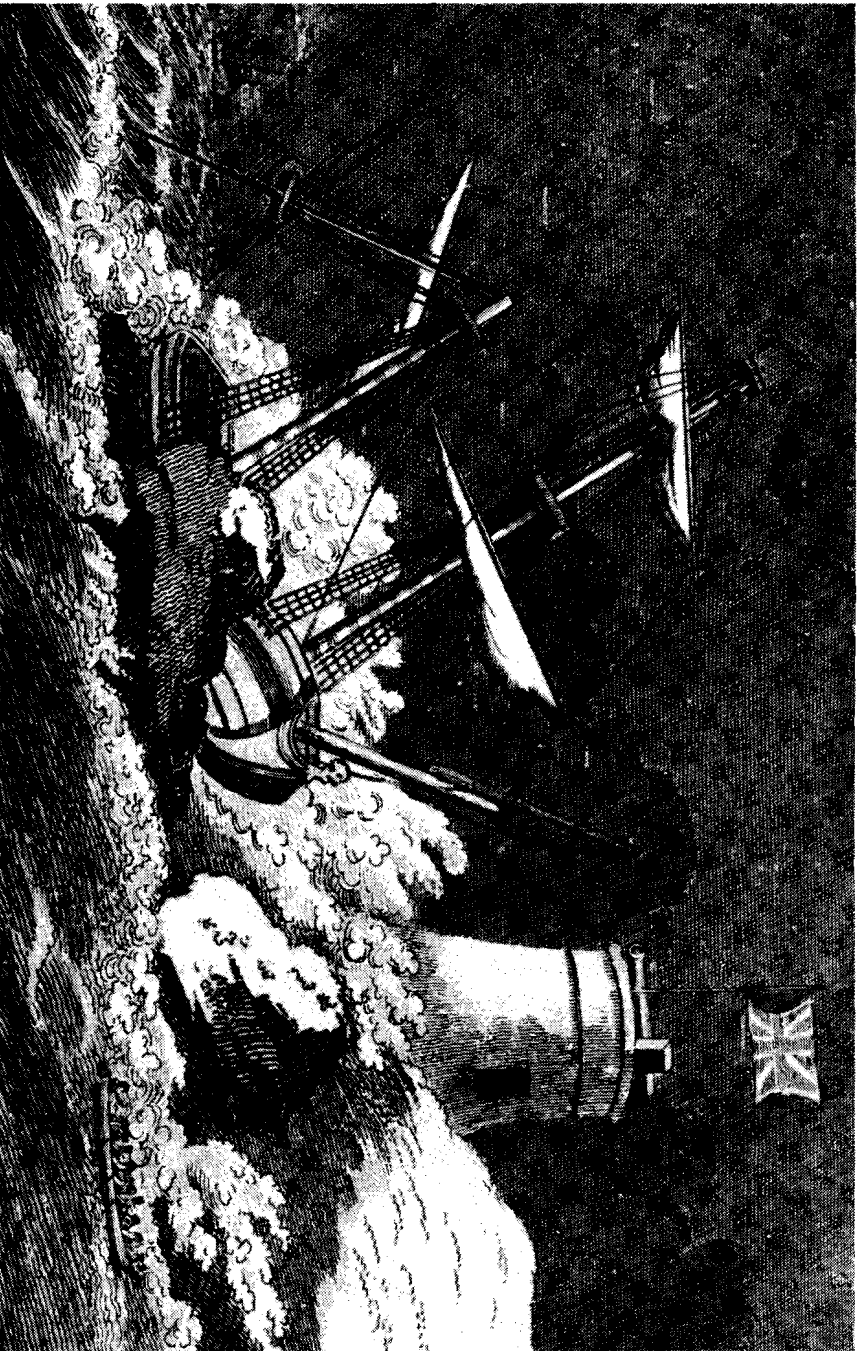
The loss of nearly four hundred lives in this tragedy excited great feeling, and the aftermath was described in detail —

"The shores of the neighbourhood of Seapoint house present a scene of the most horrid and appalling kind — human bodies of both sexes from mature age to infancy . . . The broken fragments of trunks, wearing apparel, arms, provisions, naval wreck, etc. etc, which accompany them, form altogether, perhaps as dreadful a scene as ever has been contemplated by human nature."

Surprisingly contemporary accounts and later historians seem to make little out of the fact the losses in the Bay in this storm were very much greater than those involving the transport ships alone. On that same evening, a collier went down between Dun Laoghaire and the South Bull with the loss of all on board, and a trader and Liverpool packet appear to have met the same fate.

The residents of the area were horrified by these tragedies and in 1818 a petition was signed in Monkstown Church by the nobility and gentry calling for the provision of an 'asylum harbour' at Dun Laoghaire.

The construction of the railway began in 1832, and the first train was drawn by horse in 1834. The first locomotive train was seen on the new line on October 9th when "a train of



The wreck of *HMS Prince of Wales* at the Martello Tower, Seapoint,
19th November, 1807

From *Walker's Hibernia Magazine*, 1807.

carriages crowded with ladies and gentlemen, proceeded the entire length of the line from the station-house at Westland Row to Salt-hill. There were eight carriages attached to the train; one of the first class, three second, and four of the third. The first trip was made by the locomotive engine called the *Hibernia*, and with the many disadvantages attendant on a first starting, the trip to the station house at Salt-hill was performed in fifteen minutes and a half; and to Dublin in twenty two and a half minutes." The line was formally opened in December with a service provided half-hourly on weekdays from 9 am to 5 pm and every twenty minutes on Sunday, at a cost for single fares of 1s, 8d, and 6d for the three classes.

Monkstown was now readily accessible from Dublin, and the development of the area is evident from the fine variety of Victorian architecture that exists in the area. One result of the expanding population was the founding of a voluntary hospital, Monkstown Hospital, which opened just 150 years ago with four wards, each containing eight beds.

Monkstown and Salthill soon became fashionable and photographs of the period show delightful bathing facilities at the base of the West Pier. How sad today to reflect on the potential for beauty and recreation offered by the shoreline of Seapoint, Monkstown and Salthill, and how dismaying to view the desolation of the area resulting from indiscriminate tipping by Dun Laoghaire Corporation, and the lack of maintenance of an amenity which in any other country would be valued and preserved rather than neglected and destroyed.

For those wishing to learn more of the history of Monkstown I recommend the following on which I have relied and acknowledge with gratitude.

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