

Palmerstown House

Palmerstown House near Johnstown was home to the Bourke family from the early 1700s to the 1920s. The Bourkes came to live in Kill in 1641. The family were members of the Catholic religion until 1689 but they then decided to follow the state creed (as laid down by law) and became members of the Church of England. Ireland was ruled by Britain at that time and the Bourkes were declaring their loyalty to the British Crown. This change of religion allowed the Bourkes to own land and become members of Parliament. The Bourkes loyalty was rewarded when they were given the titles "Baron of Naas" (1776) and "Earl of Mayo" (1785).

The Bourke family owned several hundred acres of land in Kill and Johnstown and, by all accounts, were good landlords. Richard Southwell Bourke (6th Earl of Mayo) was elected as a Member of Parliament for Naas during the height of The Famine in 1847. It was said that he was "never out of the saddle" arranging relief works and raising funds for victims of the Great Hunger. He remained a Member of Parliament for ten years. He often spoke in the House of Commons on Irish issues, and brought 38 Bills to Parliament, all relating to Ireland. On one occasion he said he "came from a family that cast in their lot with the Irish people". Richard Southwell Bourke was appointed Chief Secretary for Ireland - a post he held for three terms - in 1852.

At this time Britain also ruled India. In 1868 Richard Southwell Bourke was appointed as Viceroy of India. He was said to be a hard-working Viceroy for the four years he governed India. However, he was assassinated in 1872, by an escaped Afghan convict, while on a visit to the Andaman Islands. It was reported that " he ascended a hill to look at the sun and died on his way down - knifed". * The Earl's body was brought back to Ireland and he is buried in the graveyard in Johnstown. Legend has it that the Earl's body was immersed in a barrel of rum to preserve it on the long journey back from India. Palmerstown House was refurbished by public donations as a tribute to the Earl.

In his private life Richard Southwell Bourke was very interested in horse-breeding, horse-racing and hunting on horseback. He became Master of the Kildare Foxhounds and did a lot of work for the Hunt. (Up until the 1960s the Hunt used to meet regularly in the villages of Kill and Johnstown). Richard Bourke set up a stud in Palmerstown and sold yearlings each year during the Curragh Races. During his time as Chief Secretary he brought the Prince and Princess of Wales to Punchestown Races.**

Dermot Bourke, the seventh Earl of Mayo, was also interested in politics and hunting. He set up the Co. Kildare Archaeological Society at Palmerstown in 1891. He wrote papers for the Society as well as a history of the Kildare Hunt. Dermot Bourke was a Member of the British Parliament for 37 years.

In Dec. 1921 an agreement was reached between Britain and Ireland to set up a 26 County Irish Free State. Dermot Bourke supported the Treaty. He was made a Senator of the Irish Free State. However, Civil War broke out in Ireland and IRA members who didn't agree with the Treaty burned down many buildings which they saw as symbols of British rule in Ireland. The IRA burned down Palmerstown House on Jan. 29th 1923 as a reprisal for the execution of six men in the Curragh Prison. Family treasures brought back from India, Africa, America and Sardinia were destroyed. Palmerstown House was re-built by the Irish Free State. Lord Mayo died in London in 1927. He was 77 years of age.

***The Afghan convict was hanged for the murder. Local people believe that the man's skull was brought back to Palmerstown House.**

**** Palmerstown estate continued to be a stud farm up until its conversion to a Golf course around 2000.**



The grave of Richard Southwell Bourke in Johnstown

St. John's Church in Kill has a long association with the Earls of Mayo. When it was built in 1821 it was financed by the Earl of Mayo, the Earl of Clonmel (Scott of Bishopscourt House) and Lord Cloncurry (Lawless of Lyons House). There are plaques in the church commemorating Richard and Dermot Bourke (6th and 7th Earls), and Captain Walter Bourke who was killed in Ypres in France (16-6-1915) during the First World War. The church organ was a gift from Lady Mayo (Dermot's wife). She bought it in England in 1875 for 100 pounds. It is an 18th century German organ with the black and white keys reversed.



The entrance to St. John's Church Kill. The church still has its original half-door in the porch.

The Bourke family built cottages in Kill and Johnstown for the workers on their estate, and cottages in Kill for "married members of the RIC", the Royal Irish Constabulary. The houses are still occupied but are now in private ownership. One Countess of Mayo designed, built and managed the Dew Drop Inn in Kill. The design is similar to English country inns. The Johnstown Inn was called the Mayo Arms Hotel when the Earls of Mayo owned Johnstown. It was the second coach stop from Dublin. When "the village wives complained their husbands were drinking too much" the Dowager Countess of Mayo (presumably Richard's wife) took away the Mayo Arms Hotel's licence.

The Mayos were interested in helping to educate the local children before the National Schools were set up in the 1830s. The family provided money to run a school in a house in the village (next door to the current Mace car-park).