

DRUMBANAGHER HOUSE AND GARDEN

BY MYLES REID

*(Myles Reid is a horticulturist attached to the Botanic Gardens Glasnevin, Dublin.
His great-grandparents, John Reid and Catherine Ward,
met at Drumbanagher House 150 years ago.)*

About the year 1860 a young boy arrived to train as a gardener at Drumbanagher House. Among the tasks allotted to him were: -

- **staying up all night in winter to keep the fires in the glasshouses going - so that frost did not affect the plants.**
- **keeping the fruit and vegetable garden in good order and examining for any pests or diseases.**
- **weeding the flower borders, cutting the lawns, cleaning the garden tools and equipment every day delivering the daily supply of fruit, vegetable and flower requirements to the servants in the house**
- **and generally working from dawn to dusk to learn his trade.**

About the same time a young girl arrived to work in the house as a servant. She was sent out each day to collect herbs, fruit and vegetables from the garden. She walked down a path made of clinkers from the daily rounds of cleaning out the fireplaces. Her duties included refreshing the flower vases in the hall, study and dining room daily. This involved many trips back and forth to the gardens.

She made many extra journeys on days when important guests are being entertained. And important guests there were! For example in Flora Close's diary she notes that in 1879:

"Visit of the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough (the Lord Lieutenant) to Drumbanagher. Uncle Harry came with his coach. House party 28 - altogether 86 people." The Newry Harriers Hunt Ball was also held here every year.

A love and understanding developed between the young gardener and the servant girl and later, when the former reached 20 years of age, they married. These were my great grandfather and great grandmother, John Reid and Catherine Ward.

The setting for this romance was Drumbanagher House and gardens, home of the Close family. The Closes were of Yorkshire origin and purchased the Drumbanagher Estate in 1818 from John Moore. Moore was a descendant of Garret Moore of Mellifont who was granted the lands in 1609. The existing house was burned down in 1820 and in 1829 Colonel Maxwell Close and his wife Anna (nec Brownlow) engaged



Drumbanagher House (South)

William Henry Playfair, Architect, of Edinburgh to design and build Drumbanagher House. Playfair's work, which still adorns much of Edinburgh, earned that city the title *"Athens of the North"* and includes Royal Terrace, Regents Terrace and the Church of Scotland General Assembly Hall (which was used as the Scottish Parliament until their new building was completed). He also designed and built several private houses in Scotland and in Ireland. Drumbanagher House, which was described as one of his grandest private houses, was built in the Italian style with Scotch Sandstone and in *'A Guide through Ireland'* James Fraser (1854) describes Drumbanagher as *"a modern mansion in the Italian style"* and adds:



Drumbanagher House (Front)

"That it is by far the most beautiful and magnificent example in this kingdom of that rich variety of architecture. From the higher terrace in front of this fine house you command a view of the beautifully varied fertile country lying eastwards."

It was one of two houses built in Northern Ireland by

Playfair, The other house, at Lurgan, is Brownlow House, built in 1833, and still standing. Drumbanagher was so large a house that Mrs. Alexandra Close recorded:

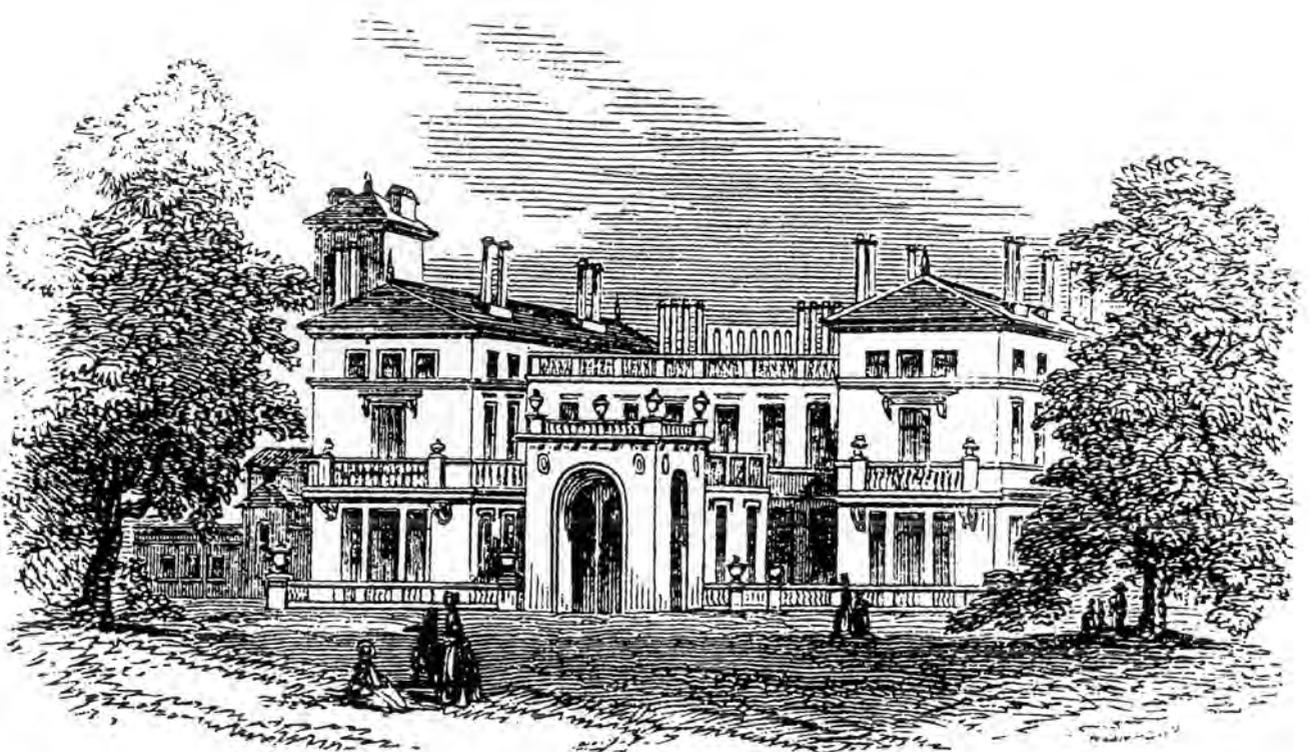
"That the maze of passageways and staircases would baffle the most alert visitor and the workmen followed a red tape to find their way back to the job after lunch-time."

Work commenced in 1830 and the house was completed in 1837 at a cost of £80,000.

The house was demolished in 1951 and now only the portico of this wonderful building and one gate lodge, possibly designed by Playfair, remain. According to the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens in Northern Ireland the Drumbanagher Demesne covers 160 hectares and *"Mature parkland and shelter trees remain among the forest planting. Large exotic trees emerge above the canopy."*

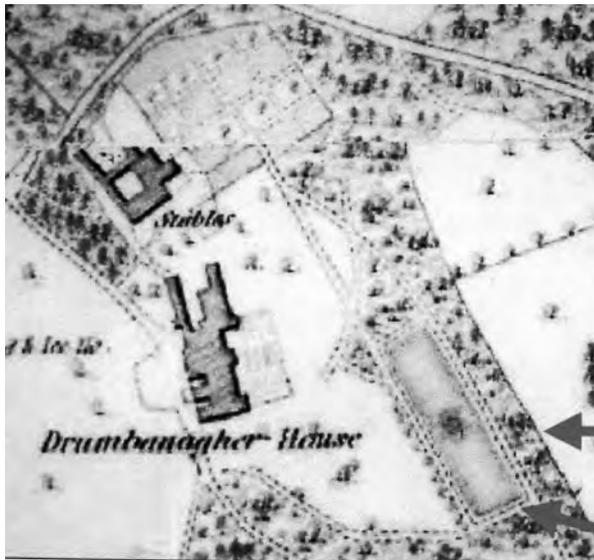
It is clear that from its earliest days the demesne contained a great variety of different types of trees. In the book *'The Miseries and Beauties of Ireland'* by Jonathan Binns (1837) a good description of the house and grounds is given:

"In company with Mr. Blacker, we visited Col. Close, who is becoming, under the able advice of that gentleman, a spirited improver. On his estate at Drumbanagher is a magnificent villa, of the pure Italian style, in the design of which the architect Mr Playfair, of Edinburgh has displayed consummate skill. It is surrounded by gently sloping ground of great extent, adorned with plantations and stately trees. The terraces and lawns are ornamented with water, and parterres enriched with the gayest flowers. From this splendid mansion a striking effect is produced. The gentle slope is terminated by a sudden and precipitous descent; and the eye, unconscious of a deep and wide-spreading valley that intervenes, is carried to the richly cultivated land at the foot of the noble mountains that bound the view."



This excellent individual has the good fortune to possess a valuable agent in Mr. Blacker, under whose direction he is adopting the agricultural plan so successfully pursued on the Gosford estate. From the higher terrace in the front of this fine house, you command a view of the beautifully varied fertile country lying eastwards."

One of the many tasks of the young gardener was managing the flower gardens, the description of which was passed on to our family. It was said that this was a most magnificent garden. This period, towards the end of the nineteenth century, saw the introduction of new and exotic plants from all around the world. There would have been great competition to get the latest plants from abroad and to be first to have them flower. The area around Armagh and Down was noted for its nurseries including Daisy Hill Nursery in Newry, McGredys of Portadown, and Slieve Donard Nurseries in Newcastle.



Taking a closer look at the 1840's Ordnance Survey map of Drumbanagher, the following can be seen: -

- To the southeast of the house a rectangular lake/pond structure with an island feature in the centre.
- At the rear of the stables is a marked area which is the walled gardens.
- To the back of the house is a garden layout which was the 'Pleasure Garden' laid out by Lady Muriel Close.
- The house faces to the southwest so this side would have had a good view over the surrounding landscape.
- A mound/Ice House is located off to the northwest of the house.
- A quarry listed near front of house.
- A Cascade on the bottom left of map.

Recently I came across references to the gardens in the publication:- *'A History of Gardening in Ireland (1995)'* by Lamb & Bove which states that Gertrude Jekyll was commissioned to design plans for the flower borders in

the gardens at Drumbanagher. It seems that around the year 1911 Lady Muriel Close commissioned Gertrude Jekyll to make a design for the flower borders. The garden area is now planted over with trees by the Forestry



This picture would appear to be painted from the far corner of the rectangular lake looking to the back of the house where the pleasure gardens were located. It is signed by Major Maxwell A. Close who was very involved in the garden layout.

Service but we can get some idea how this looked from the old pictures and plans.

Gertrude Jekyll was the first woman to be involved with the Pre-Raphaelites. This movement's style was used by Gertrude in embroidery work, wood carving, photography and shell pictures but it is for her garden design that she is best remembered. Her quote: *"Cottage gardens for the larger houses"* probably shows how her design would look when planted. We all can relate to the cottage garden in scale but Jekyll brought this art to such a level that her work lives on in many large houses and estates. Mount Stewart in Co. Down and Heywood in Co. Laois are two of her best garden designs that still exist in these islands. Her plans are such that one could take a section and use in a small garden and still get the cottage garden effect. Jekyll's own principles for her gardens were:

"The first purpose of a garden is to be a place of quiet beauty, such as will give delight to the eyes and repose and refreshment to the mind – this can be achieved the following way:

- 1 – *By forming and respecting spaces of lawn, unbroken by flowerbeds or any encumbrance.*
- 2 – *By the simple grouping of noble types of hardy vegetation, whether their beauty be that of a flower, foliage or general aspect.*
- 3 – *By putting the right things in the right place, a matter which involves both technical knowledge and artistic ability.*



A view from the Pleasure Gardens



Painting of the lower lake signed by Major Maxwell A. Close

4— By employing restraint and proportion in the matter of numbers and/or quantity, to use enough and not too much of any one thing at a time.

5— By grouping plants in sequences of good colouring and with due regard to their form and stature and season of blooming, or autumnal beauty of foliage.

6— By seeing how to join house to garden and garden to woodland.

In Lamb and Bowe's history it is recorded that:

"In 1889, Miss Jekyll was introduced to a young man named Edwin Lutyens one of a growing band of architects who rejected the pomposity of Victorian architecture and advocated, in the wake of the arts and crafts movement, a return to the traditional building craft in the more modest dwellings of the coming age. Miss Jekyll was sympathetic to these ideas, and almost immediately commissioned Lutyens to design her own house. Thus began one of the most fruitful collaborations in the history of garden design.

Two important gardens in Ireland were created by this partnership, namely Lambay Island, Co Dublin and the aforementioned Heywood garden in Co Laois. Lutyens would lay out a series of architectural compartments around the house, which were then clothed with planting to Miss Jekyll's designs."

Now Drumbanagher House is no more and the 'Pleasure Ground' or 'Lady Muriel's Garden' is only a memory. From my research it is clear that there was a fine garden there in the past. Perhaps someone in the area has old photographs or pictures of the house and gardens. If so the Local History Society would be most interested in making copies of them for their library. As the great

grandson of the young gardener who worked there, all those years ago, I will be happy if this article will encourage the reader to get out and plant a few flowers.



Painting of the rock garden designed by Gertrude Jekyll