

THE REILLY FAMILY OF SCARVAGH HOUSE

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Scarvagh House

In his 1744 publication *'The Ancient and Present State of the County of Down'* historian, Walter Harris wrote, "North west of Loughbrickland, about two miles is a house and good improvement of Mr John Reilly, standing pleasantly on a rising ground near the new canal and Scarvagh Bridge, where the said canal passes under two large arches lately built. Mr Reilly has a view to forming a village near this bridge And for this has obtained a patent for Fairs and Markets".

While it seems to have been generally accepted that Scarvagh House dates from around 1717, the date has been questioned and there is some doubt as to which of the Reilly family was responsible. In his work entitled *'A visitation of the Seats and Arms of noblemen and gentlemen of Great Britain and Ireland'*, published in 1855, Sir Bernard Burke states that the house was built by Myles Reilly. Other sources suggest that it was in fact Myles' son John, who built the first Scarvagh House and that it

was built at a later date, for old maps of the area fail to show the house as late as 1739. However as we know from Walter Harris, quoted above, John Reilly was definitely in residence in 1744. The Reillys had their roots in Co Cavan where the O'Reillys were once a dominant clan and where the name remains the most common in the county.

Myles Reilly (1660 – 1735) was described as a 'distiller' in Lurgan and legend has it that as he had done a favour to William of Orange, he was granted as an estate all the land he could walk round in a day planting acorns. The facts appear to be much more mundane as Sir Bernard Burke in his work, goes on to say that Myles Reilly bought the estate from Alderman William Hawkins of London, who had been granted the land when the former Magennis territory was confiscated.

While the Scarva estate's connection to King William is certain, his connection to the Reilly family is less clear. Alderman William Hawkins

The Reillys of Scarvagh (part of Family Tree)

Myles Reilly (Lurgan)
(1660 – 1735)

John Reilly — m 1738 — Lucy Savage
(Dates not Known) (Ardkeen Co Down)

John Reilly — m 1773 — Jane Lushington
(1745 – 1804) (Sittingbourne, Kent)

John Lushington Reilly — m 1807 — Louisa Temple
(1175 -1840) (Waterstown, Co Westmeath)

John Temple Reilly — m 1865 — Elizabeth O'Hara
(1812 – 1903) (Co Galway)

Gustavus Myles Reilly
(1870 – 1909)

died in 1680, when Myles Reilly was only 20, so his purchase of part of Hawkins' land must have taken place after William Hawkins' death and while Myles Reilly may have owned the lands on which King William and his army camped at Scarva in 1690 en route to the Boyne, there is no evidence at all that there was a Reilly in residence there at that time.

Myles Reilly had four sons, James, Charles, Marlow and John, and it was **John Reilly**, his youngest son, who eventually took up residence and ownership of the Scarva estate. From *'Buildings of South Down'* (2019) we learn that "*it is more likely ... that the actual establishment of a house and demesne in the area was indeed the work of John Reilly who had taken possession of the estate (or at least part of it) around 1735, and who, with the completion of the nearby Newry Canal in 1741-42, would have had a good incentive to invest in his property.*"

John Reilly did, to some extent at least, see his plan to build a village realised, for a map of County Down in 1755 shows the beginnings of Scarva village with its coal-yards and stores on the banks of the Canal. He gave the land for the building of the Presbyterian Meeting-house and erected and supported a male and female school. He had become friendly with Thomas Steers the engineer responsible for the construction of the Newry Canal and this friendship, appears to have led him to establish a salt-works at Scarva, as Steers was involved in that business in Liverpool. In his 1844 publication, Walter Harris noted, "*There is a salt-works carried on in partnership between Mr Reilly, Mr Cherry and Mr Steers.*" In 1738 John Reilly married Lucy Savage of Ardkeen Co Down. They had two sons, Daniel who died in childhood and John, who inherited Scarvagh House.



John Reilly M.P. (1745 – 1804)

This **John Reilly (1745 – 1804)** is thought to have considerably added to the house and wings. He certainly raised the profile of the Reilly family. In 1773, he married Jane Lushington of Sittingbourne, Kent. He was High Sherriff of Co Down in 1776 and of Co Armagh in 1786. He served as Member of Parliament for Blessington, Co Wicklow in the Irish Parliament in Dublin, from 1778 to 1800. He was regarded as something of a ‘dandy’ being very fastidious about his appearance

and dress. His portrait by Thomas Pope Stevens in the Ulster Museum suggests as much, while a friend of his the Marquis of Downshire wrote to him in 1795, that if he John Reilly), “..... *did not spend so much time twice a day on you toilette and putting your cravat into such elegant form,* “he would have more time for other matters.

It was a long-standing tradition in Ireland and elsewhere, that there was always a welcome at big houses for the wandering bards and musicians and John Reilly appears to have continued this traditional patronage. Several notable musicians, who had taken part in the Belfast Harpers’ Festival of 1792, including William Kennedy, Arthur O’Neill and the elderly harper Charles Byrne, visited and were warmly welcomed and stayed at Scarvagh House. A Miss Jane Reilly was taught by Charles Byrne and is said to have had the distinction of being the last person to have been taught to play the harp through the medium of Irish.

The site of Scarvagh House is across part of an ancient earthwork known as ‘The Dane’s Cast’. The original two-storey house formed part of what is today the central section but it was extended at both ends and altered several times, both internally and externally, during the centuries. Each succeeding generation of the family left its mark on the house in some way, although who did what and when, is unclear. What is certain is that by 1901

Sham Fight

The Scarvagh estate is, of course, the site of the famous ‘Sham Fight’ which takes place there annually on 13th July. The origins of the ‘Sham Fight’ are not clear, but it certainly commemorates the Williamite victories at the Boyne and Aughrim in 1690 and 1691. It also recalls what became known as the ‘Battle of Lisnagade’ an event which occurred on 13th July 1789. On that occasion, two opposing factions met at Lisnagade Fort between Loughbrickland and Scarva. The Protestant group, from Loughbrickland, were said to be marching to Gilford to commemorate the Battle of Aughrim when they were waylaid at historic Lisnagade by a Catholic faction.

When exactly the ‘Sham Fight’ moved to Scarva isn’t clear, but one tradition has it that at first the Sham Fight was held on Scarva Bridge. It seems certain, however, that the event was well-established in the estate by the time Scarvagh House was built. Today the ‘Sham Fight’ is attended by many tens of thousands annually.



Part of the 1743 map of County Down

the house consisted of 16 rooms with adjoining wings which formed a 'U' shape round the entrance courtyard.

The Reillys were never regarded as major landowners and John Reilly MP is described as *"the son of a minor landowner in Co Down."* However the family owned much property, in Banbridge town and elsewhere, and seem to have invested wisely. John Reilly held the post of Commissioner of Accounts in the Revenue Service. This was quite a prestigious position and no doubt he had many influential and wealthy friends. In the 1790s there was considerable tension in the area and a strong presence of members of the

United Irishmen. The government was fearful of rebellion and took action to disarm would be rebels in the area. That John Reilly was well-respected and trusted by the authorities is illustrated by the following 'top secret' letter sent to him by Lord Downshire on the eve of the United Irishmen's rebellion in 1798.

This letter, now in the Public Records Office reads: *"To John Reilly Scarva 11th March 1798. An order goes from General Nugent to search every house in or about Scarva to take up arms, ammunition etc. Mr Watson, you and Fivey will give every assistance, and take every precaution that nothing is left undone that should be done. Be secret and expeditious. The orders to the officers are very plain and intelligible and positive. The order for the officers is not to be opened until 5am in the morning. Poyntzpass, Banbridge and Loughbrickland are all in your predicament...."*

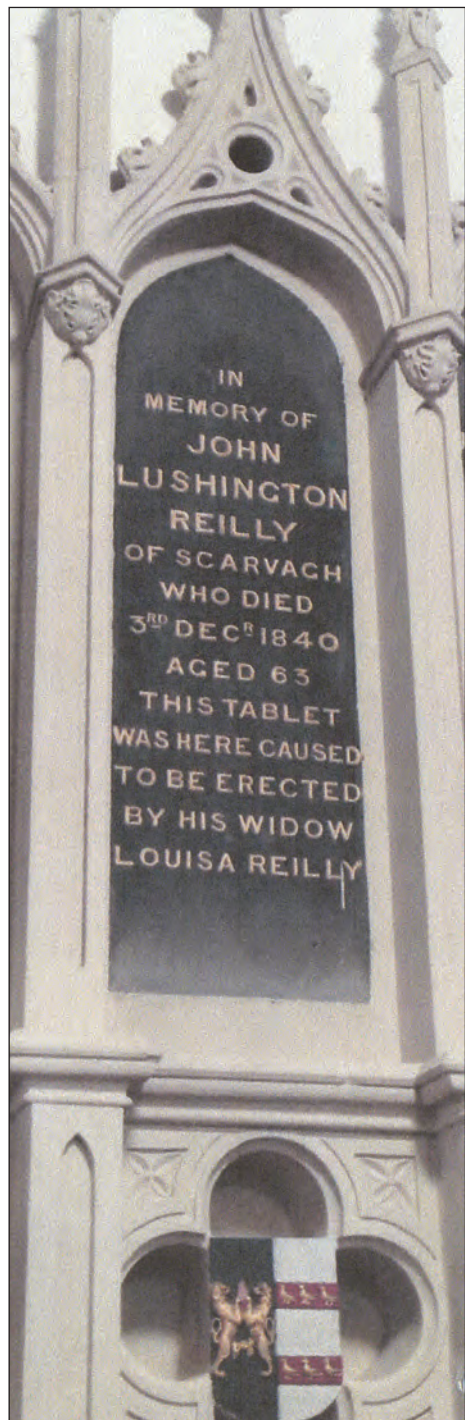
Some changes such as extending the wings were carried out at the house near the end of the century and it seems possible that the driving force behind these changes was John's heir to the house and estate, John Lushington Reilly, who was later shown to have talent as an architect and artist.



John Lushington Reilly and his family.

John Lushington Reilly (1775 -1840) who inherited the estate when his father died in 1804 was a particularly able and talented man and he, it is thought, may have been responsible for many of the features which give the interior of Scarvagh House its unique character. In 1807 he married Louisa Temple, daughter of Gustavus Handcock

Temple of Waterstown House, Co Westmeath and they had a large family of five sons and seven



Reilly Family Memorial in St. Matthew's Parish Church, Scarva.

daughters. Waterstown House was described, “*In its heyday the house and demesne were amongst the most splendid in Co Westmeath.*” Lushington Reilly and his family left Scarvagh House in 1822 and went to Galway, where he took up the position

of Collector of Customs at Galway Port. He was very well regarded in the city and ‘*The Galway Advertiser*’ (quoting from ‘*The Connacht Journal*’) in April 2020, described him as “... *a great benefactor of the town and the neighbourhood especially during the great famine of 1822.*”

While John Lushington Reilly may have made occasional visits to Scarvagh House, it seems that he made his home in Galway, for there are frequent mentions of him in the Galway press up to a year before his death. He lived in West House a large house, which later became St Mary's College, and entertained in a lavish style. For example ‘*The Galway Patriot*’ reported in October 1838 that...*The Marquis and Marchioness of Downshire are at present on a visit to West House, the hospitable residence of John Lushington Reilly Esq.*”

He was an enthusiastic amateur architect having probably been responsible for many of the Gothic and Jacobean features at Scarvagh House and in 1822 he was commissioned to produce plans for a gallery and other alterations to St Nicholas's Church, Galway. His eldest son and heir to the estate was John Temple Reilly while one daughter, Gertrude Harriet married Robert Quin Alexander of Co Meath in 1840 and came to live nearby at Acton House.

John Lushington Reilly died on 3rd December 1840.



King William's Tree in the grounds of Scarvagh House.

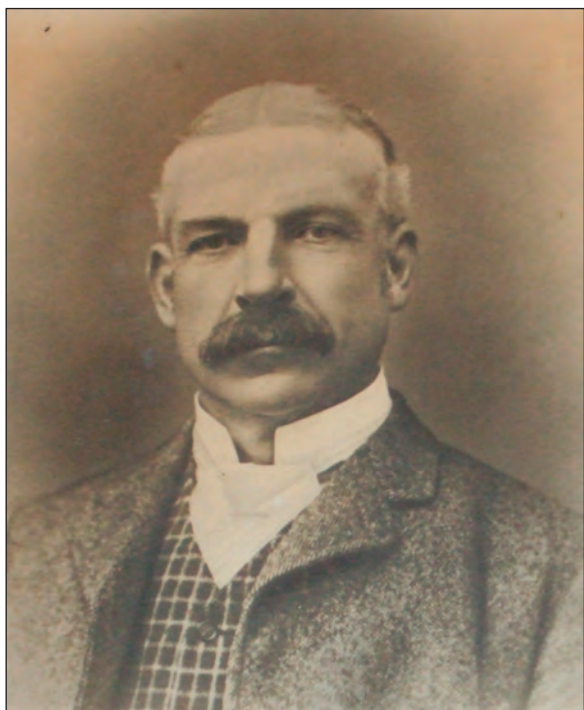
John Temple Reilly (1812 – 1903) Seems to have grown up in Galway and there is mention in the press of his attendance at various social events there. However, when he inherited Scarvagh House he returned to live there. It is accepted that he, too made various alteration and added to the character of the house, making it appear older than it actually was. He it was who added the porch at the entrance and the gates and avenue leading to the house. In 1844 he rented Coolnacran House in Loughbrickland possibly because of the renovation works going on at Scarvagh and he was living there when famine hit the area. He acted as Chairman of a very inclusive cross-community Relief Committee which did much to help the poor. Having returned to Scarva, he gave the land in 1850 for the building of St Matthew's Church in the village.

In 1865, at the age of 53 he married Galway-born

Elizabeth O'Hara . They had four children, two of whom died in early infancy. His son Gustavus Myles Reilly was born in 1870 and his daughter Ann Elizabeth was born in 1869.

During the latter years of the 19th century, it seems that the fortunes of the family declined and when John Temple Reilly died in 1903 at the age of 91, he was so deeply in debt that the house, its contents and the estate had to be sold to clear the deficit. The auction of the contents of the house, in January 1904, attracted dealers from far and wide and it must have been difficult for Gustavus to watch as the family heirlooms, which had been gathered over the previous two hundred years, were disposed of one by one. Gustavus, who was living in England and died there in 1909 aged 39 was the last of the Reillys of Scarvagh. The family name however survives in Banbridge in Reilly Street, Reilly Park and others elsewhere.

The house and lands were bought in 1904 by Sir John Nutting, a wealthy Dublin businessman. He had no intention of living there and in 1907 let the house to Henry Thomson of Altnaveigh House, Newry. When Gustavus Myles Reilly died in 1909, Henry Thomson bought the freehold and made extensive improvements to the house and land. Following Henry Thomson's death in 1916 the property passed to his nephew, Henry B. Thomson, from whom the present owner's family bought Scarvagh in 1936.



Henry Thomson



Alfred Buller, purchaser in 1936