

A Bad Day at Magill's Ford

The Battle of Gilford

By D.E. Mc Elroy

The relationship between the village of Gilford and the River Bann is a very close one. The village straggles along both banks of the river and was once unkindly described, in a Belfast newspaper, as looking as if - *"the houses had been dropped from a aeroplane - and many of the parachutes had failed to open"*.

It is in fact not one village, but two - the old village of Gilford and the newer creation of Dunbarton which was built to house the mill workers of the nineteenth century. Dunbarton is that part which stretches from the spinning mill towards Portadown.

The name 'Gilford' has been arrived at by a process of evolution. Old maps give the spelling 'Gillford' and earlier still the name was 'Magill's Ford,' this name coming from the founder Sir John Magill.

The old name lies behind the title of this article and has echoes of the old titles of many cowboy films and books e.g. 'Bad day at Black Rock'. The bad day concerned was a very specific date - 6 March 1772. The events of that day are still very much alive in the handed-down memories of some of the older people in the area. The events had much in common with a western. There was:

- tension between a large landowner and small farmers
- a siege
- violent death through the use of firearms
- an adventurous escape with the horseman riding bareback
- the cavalry to the rescue.

Following the plot of a western it is possibly best to set the scene, then to establish the characters and finally to look at the action.

THE SCENE

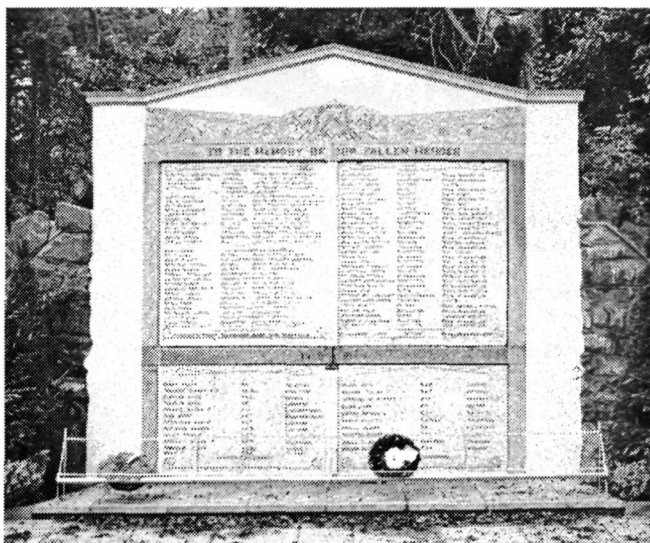
Gilford is situated where a ford occurs at a meander on the Bann. The old road from Dublin to Antrim crossed this ford. Indeed at a short distance from the village is an ancient mile post showing the

distance to Dublin as being 61 Irish miles. (1 Irish mile = 2240 yards).

This area was once Magennis country but was lost to that family as a result of the Cromwellian land settlement, later confirmed by the Act of Settlement of 1662. The townlands along this part of the Bann were given to the soldiers of Fleetwood's Regiment of Foot. As most of these men wanted to return to their own families they sold their rights to a Captain Barrett. He bought in so much land that he was able to sub-let part of it. The townlands of Loughans, Drumarian and Ballymacanallan were leased by Capt. John Magill who already owned part of Ballynagarrick.

Magill founded a village on the site of the present Main Street (i.e. from the War Memorial to the Square). Two mills were built, one being a flour mill and the other a tuck mill, and mill races and ponds were dug to provide water power. He, in turn, sub-let part of his lands and among his tenants were the Crozier and Birch families.

The Magills died out on the male side and the property passed to close relations. These were the Johnston family, a branch of the Johnstons of Annadale in Scotland.



Gilford War Memorial.



Main Street Gilford.

In 1730 Sir William Johnston built a fine house on the site of the present war memorial. It was surrounded by very extensive pleasure gardens containing many exotic trees.

THE CHARACTERS

THE HEARTS OF STEEL

The 1760's in the north of Ireland had brought about severe discontent among small tenant farmers due to a succession of bad harvests and impositions by the ruling class through demands for tithes, labour on the roads and higher rents. Events were brought to a head by Lord Donegall's need for ready cash to finance the large Palladian mansion which he was building in Staffordshire.

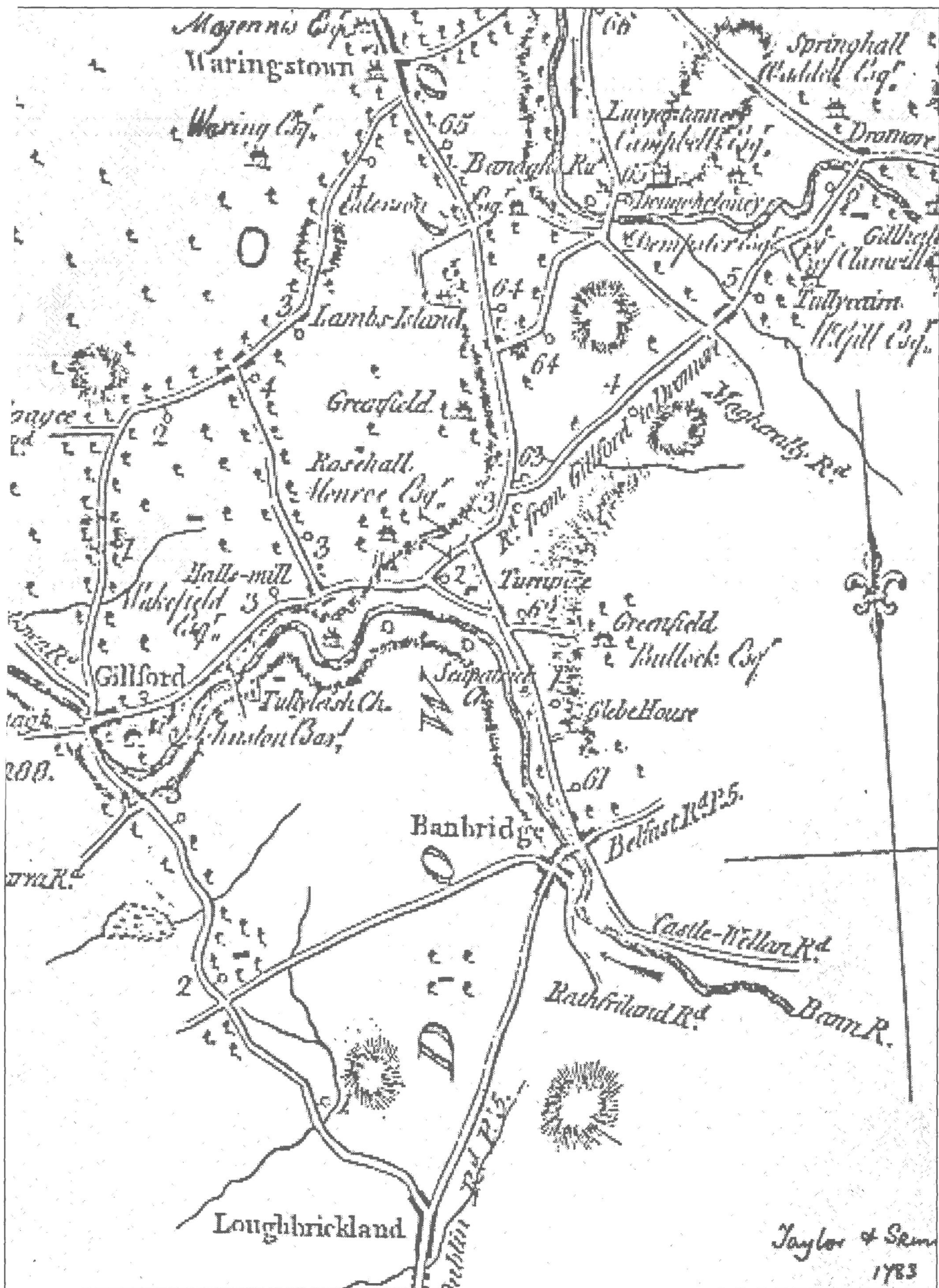
Tenants were prepared for a rise in rents when their leases became due for renewal but such increases would not bring in extra revenue quickly enough for Donegall's need. He, instead, demanded a heavy fine to be paid for the renewal of the lease. Tenants who often lived on a subsistence basis could not find immediate cash and so the fine was often paid by

speculators who thus acquired the leases. They then re-let the farms to landless peasants who were so desperate for land that they were willing to pay exorbitant sums.

On Donegall's estates in South Antrim tenants who were faced with dispossession formed a secret society to resist forcibly the new policy. Within months this society had spread through Antrim, Down and Armagh. This rapid growth testifies to the very real sense of injustice felt by the tenants. The following contemporary verse speaks of their motives:

*Some of the tenants still remain that feel
Their wrongs and can resist with Hearts of Steel
Bravely resolved in mutual league unite
To keep possession and support their right.*

The tactics of the Hearts of Steel (or Steelboys) were those of intimidation - intimidation of landlords, speculators and those who would have paid the higher rent. This intimidation took the form of threats of personal violence, the burning of houses and barns and the 'houghing' (maiming by the cutting of hamstrings) of cattle.



Taylor & Skinners map of Gilford area 1783.

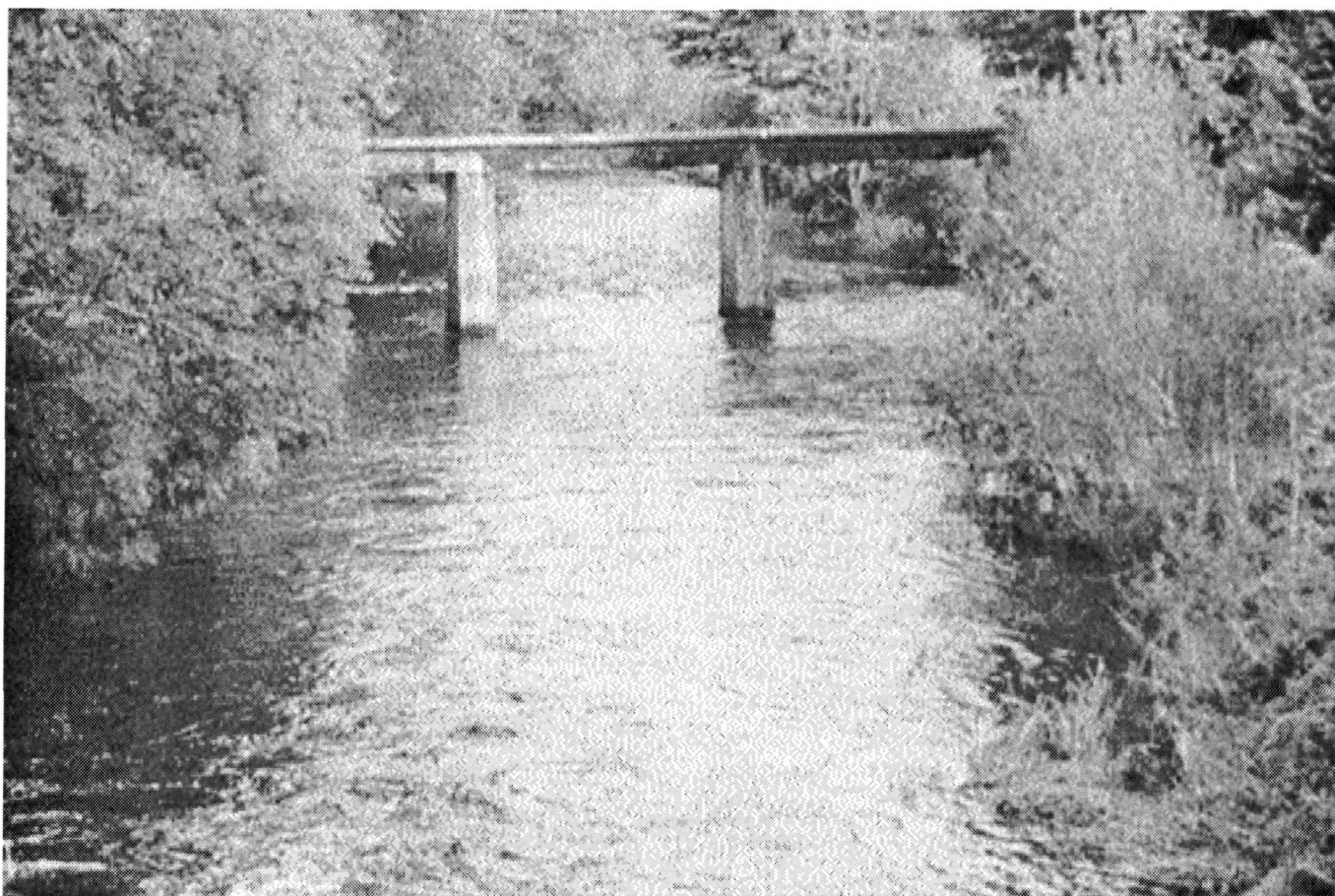
Many of the Steelboys were Presbyterian but by no means all of the Presbyterian community was involved in the movement. All over the North-Eastern counties congregations published lists of those who were opposed to the movement and also published the names of those who refused to subscribe their signatures to the list! One may suspect, therefore, that many of those whose names appeared in the notices of disassociation with the movement in the Belfast Newsletter in 1771 and 1772 may have been secret sympathisers. It is noteworthy that juries were unwilling to convict Steelboys and this was often due to sympathy with their cause rather than fear of the consequences. The following notice inserted in the 'Newsletter' by the Presbytery of Dromore is indicative of the feelings of the more sober elements of society:

A Serious Warning and Admonition

With the utmost concern we have of late observed in our bounds a dissolute and licentious spirit productive of numberless disorders. With grief we find that many persons:

- riotously associate
- travel from house to house
- extort arms and ammunition by the most dreadful threats from peaceful inhabitants
- administer unlawful oaths
- burn and otherwise destroy houses
- compel men to sign leases at what valuations they please and assume to themselves the power of courts of justice consulting and decreeing in all causes referred to them and putting their determinations in force by the most violent means.

We entreat you for God's sake, for Christ's sake, turn not your liberty any longer into such licentiousness. Enter not into the council of the ungodly; and may the God of peace bring order out of confusion.



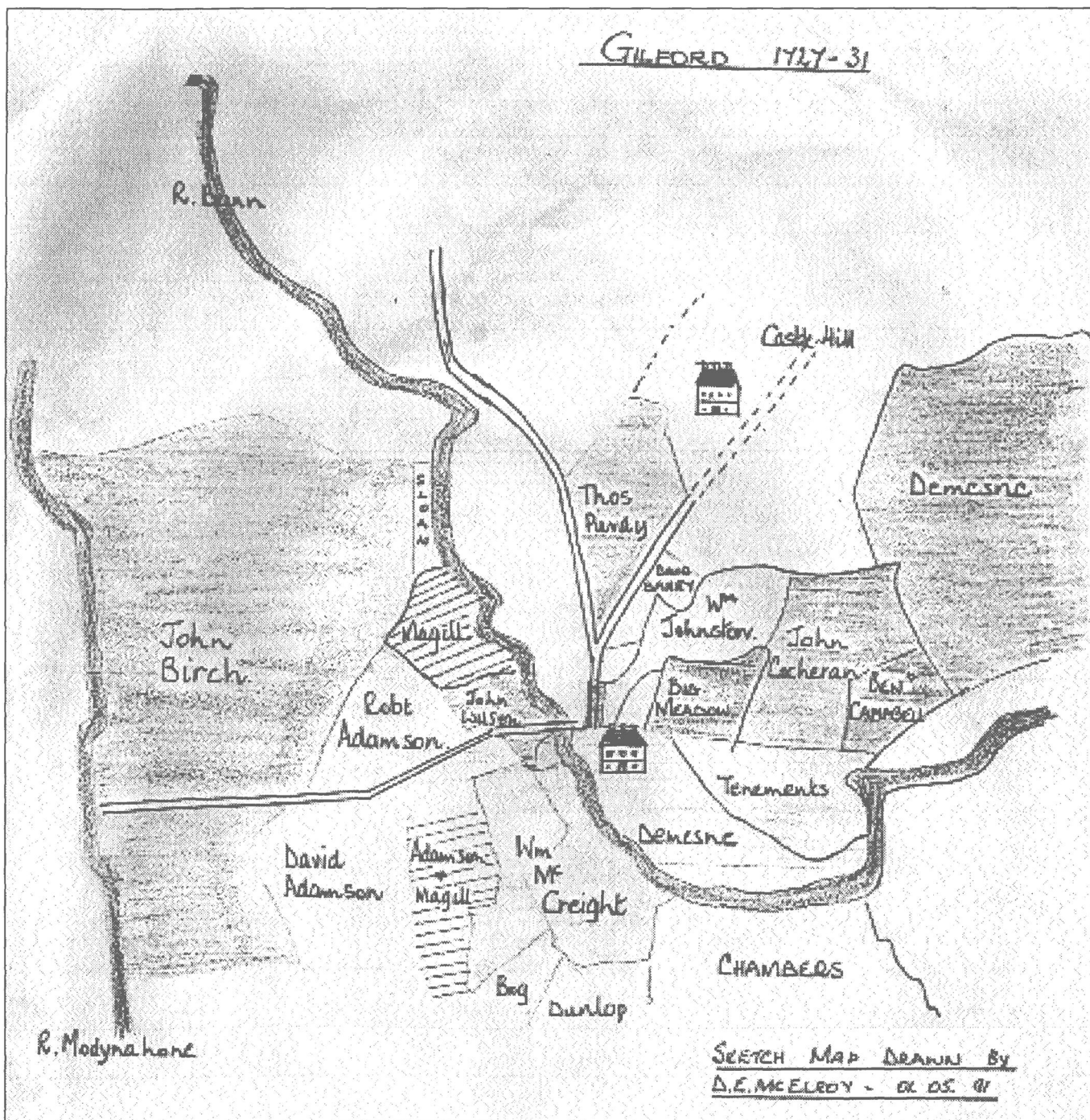
River Bann At Gilford.

RICHARD JOHNSON

Richard Johnston had come into ownership of the Gilford estate on the death of his father in 1758. He was descended from the Johnstons of Annandale in Scotland, famous border reivers whose motto was '*Nunquam Non Paratus*' - "Never unprepared", a motto by which he lived in a convincing manner. He was described by his contemporaries as energetic, zealous and implacable, epithets which were well deserved in his relationships with the Hearts of Steel. As a magistrate he was most unwilling to tolerate the

development of the Steelboy movement in the Gilford district, - an antipathy which resulted in him being the recipient of a number of threatening letters from the movement.

In a characteristically energetic response to those letters he formed a local defence force of militia comprised of his friends, neighbours and tenants. There were about fifty members in this force and an ex-army sergeant, Alexander Adamson, was employed to train them so that they would be able to resist any attack by insurgents.



Gilford 1727 - 1731.

This training began on 24 February 1772 and along with the other recruits was on somewhat unlikely member - the Rev. Samuel Morrell, Presbyterian minister of Tullylish, three miles from Gilford.

REV. SAMUEL MORRELL

(Variously spelt *Morrell, Morrel or Morrelle*)

The Rev. Samuel Morrell had been called to Tullylish on 6 March 1768 at the young age of twenty-four. He was, almost certainly, a member of the famous Huguenot family whose history is chronicled in Samuel Smiles' book on the Huguenots. When he came to Tullylish he showed an extreme dislike both for the Hearts of Steel and also for the popular superstitions of the area. This dislike was demonstrated by his membership of Johnston's militia on the one hand and by his actions in cutting down the blossom of a 'fairy' hawthorn on the other.

While the more affluent members of the Presbyterian community were opposed to the Hearts of Steel, his action in joining an armed force against them was seen, even at the time, as somewhat extreme. An explanation may lie in his friendship with Richard Johnston, which seems to have been a close and genuine relationship, and also in the desire on the part of the Huguenots - after having been opposed to the state of France for generations - to become part of the British established order.

THE ACTION

The Battle of Gilford

On 2 March 1772, a group of eight hundred Hearts of Steel demonstrated in Gilford by marching up and down the village street, under the windows of the castle. After a time they disbanded and went home peacefully and without having caused any damage. This challenge to his authority, however enraged Mr Johnston.

When Morrell informed him on the 5 March that the leading deputies of the Hearts of Steel were meeting at the house of one Tidderton in the townland of Clare, Johnston determined on immediate action. Accompanied by Morrell, Sgt. Adamson and a man named Thomas Logan he went immediately to Tidderton's house, where the Steelboy leaders were having a meal of herrings and potatoes.

When Johnston's band burst in they found their victims seated round the table on which there were piles of coins as well as food. It was later alleged that this money had been collected to buy ball and shot. Morrell and Adamson took two prisoners named Hill and Dennison, while Johnston and Logan also took two prisoners, one of whom was called Finlay. Finlay soon managed to escape but the other three were brought as prisoners to Gilford from whence they were sent the next morning under strong escort to Downpatrick.

Finlay, on his escape, lost no time in arousing the neighbourhood and in this he was assisted by Hill's father. Horns were blown throughout the area as a sign for a general uprising and help was requested from the Hearts of Steel in Lurgan and Portadown. On the next day, Friday 6 March, columns of Steelboys from the Gilford area, Lurgan and Portadown converged on Gilford. The Lurgan contingent was led by Richard Savage and the Portadown men by William Redmond. Contemporary writers remarked on the military discipline of the insurgents. This was largely due to the number of ex-soldiers among their leaders, Savage, for example, having been a sergeant in the army.

Various estimates have been given of the size of the rescue force, these varying between one and two thousand men. Majority opinion seemed to favour the higher number. This shows both the strength of the organisation in the area at the time and also the depth of feeling caused by Johnston's action in arresting the three. It was claimed that Hill's father had threatened to kill both Morrell and Johnston and also to cut Johnston's body into quarters and display them on the corners of the castle. By noon on 6 March the rescuers had congregated in Gilford bringing with them guns, powder and ball, horns and bugles and, interestingly, '*fire in pitchers*' for the purpose of burning down the castle. On arrival in the village their fury was increased by the discovery that the prisoners were no longer there. By his speedy action Johnston had, however, weakened his defences by sending a large number of his armed militia as an escort for the prisoners. On the afternoon of 6 March he had twenty three armed men in the castle but there was only enough powder and shot for each defender to be given ten rounds. These men were placed at the windows of the castle and prepared to resist the insurgents.

Battle Commences

Mr. Johnston leaned out of one of the parlour windows with a blunderbuss on his arm and called out to those on the street outside, asking that they send two or three representatives to speak with him. The reply to this was a volley of shots, none of which hit him.

Soon a full-blooded battle began between Hearts of Steel and the defenders of the castle. The assailants broke down the demesne wall and set fire to the gardener's house, destroying it. Fire was kept up on the gable wall, Johnston being wounded slightly in the head. Much more seriously, Samuel Morrell, was shot first in the arm and then in the left breast. After the second wound he ran up the stairs, probably in shock, and jumped out of the stairs window. Such was the rage of the attackers that they continued to fire at his body, which received many wounds. After many fruitless attempts at sending out a flag of truce, first by his steward then by himself, Johnston resolved to make a break. He jumped over a wall, swam across a mill race which ran beside his house, ran across his lawns and swam across the Bann, being fired at all the time with bullets flying about him in the water. On reaching the other side of the Bann he was so exhausted that he could not climb the steep bank. Luckily for him a sympathetic girl, called Davidson, helped him out of the water up the bank and brought him to a cabin. He mounted a horse and rode bareback to Newry to obtain help from the military garrison.

After the Battle

With their leader's escape or desertion (there are two opinions on this, though it is difficult to see what other option he had) the remaining garrison quickly surrendered, the battle having lasted half an hour. First it looked as if things might go badly for them. Thomas Logan afterwards gave evidence that both he and his father were dragged out by the assailants who debated whether to shoot him or throw him on the fire. At length they released him on his promise to take their oath and join their society. Other defenders seem to have got off lightly, the attackers desire for revenge having been satisfied by the death of Morrell and the flight of Johnston. They did destroy the interior of the house and cut down the fine trees in the demesne, but the discovery of a large quantity of wine in the cellars distracted their attentions. William Redmond formed the Portadown

men into a military formation and ordered them to march home by the shortest way possible.

He obviously did not want a general rampage to develop, especially as drink had been taken.

The Consequences

On Sunday 8 March Johnston returned to Gilford with a company of soldiers to find his house ransacked, the interior destroyed and his plantations cut down. He was later to estimate the damage done at £2,200 exclusive of the estate improvements destroyed and the title deeds and other papers lost.

For the Steelboys, the victory at Gilford proved to be a 'Pyrrhic' one as it provoked a heavy military repression in the whole area. A panic spread because of the possibilities of reprisals and one newspaper reported that in the Gilford district in the closing days of March there was scarcely a man to be seen other than those wearing red coats. Johnston, who was incensed by the death of his friend Morrell and the destruction of his property, immediately began to hunt down the ringleaders with great energy. This is shown by the following extract from the Belfast News-Letter :-

"We hear that Mr. Johnston of Gilford having received information that one Redmond, being a leader of the Hearts of Steel, was lurking in the vicinity of Monterevelin in the county of Tyrone, he, with a party of light horse, set out from Gilford to apprehend him and arriving at midnight being refused admission --- Johnston entered with the party at his back where Redmond lay. He started up and a charged pistol at his side, snapped it at Mr. Johnston's head which burnt priming whereupon one of the military party discharged his pistol and wounded Redmond in the side of which he is since died."

The account of Redmond's death does however seem to be somewhat exaggerated as he appeared a short time later as a defendant at the trials in Dublin! There was considerable sympathy on the part of the Government in Dublin for Richard Johnston, evidence of this being the grant of a pension of £400 a year to him. He was not satisfied with this and on petition soon had it raised to £800. On 27 July 1772 he was created a Baronet and later became a member of the Irish Parliament.

The Trial

This was held in Dublin, beginning on Wednesday 12 August 1772 against a background of public discontent. The decision to hold the trial in Dublin was a consequence of the difficulty of securing a conviction in the north but the residents of Co. Dublin saw this as a serious infringement of civil liberties. There were references to 'Magna Carta' and 'Habeas Corpus' and there was a general feeling that poor men could not have a fair trial so far from their homes as they could not afford to bring defence witnesses to speak on their behalf.

The accused were:

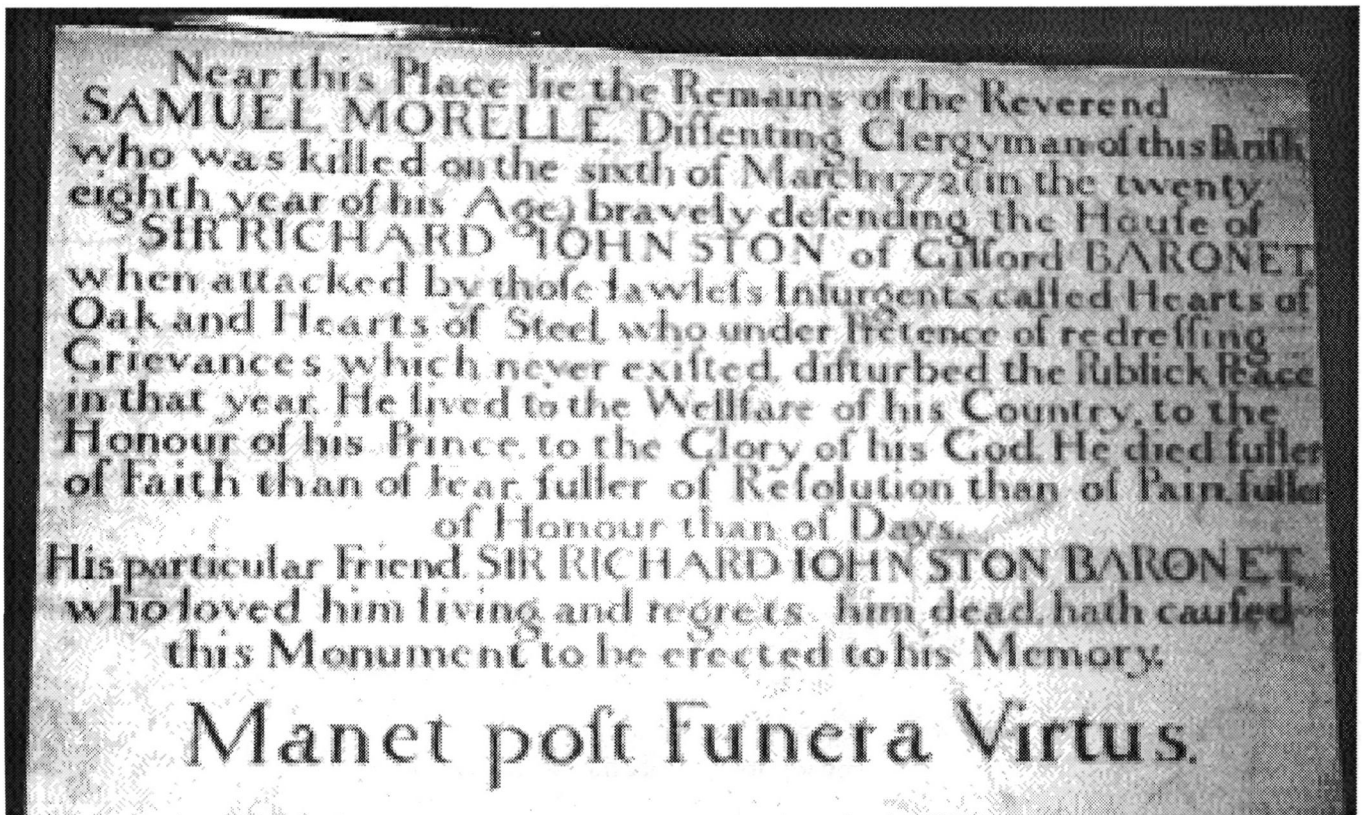
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|-----------------|---|--------------------------------------------------------|
| John Byrns | - | Murdering
Rev. Samuel Morrell |
| William Redmond | - | Leading, commanding
and disciplining insurgents |
| Philip McCusker | - | Bringing fire in a pitcher
Destroying silver knives |
| James Fryers | - | Blowing a horn |
| John Hill | - | Threatening Mr. Johnston's
life |
| Moses Evans | - | Firing two shots |
| Michael Corr | - | Being armed |
| James Davison | - | Being armed |
| George Foster | - | Plundering Mr. Johnston's
house |

The trial was conducted by nine commissioners under Lord Annally. All through the proceedings it was apparent that there was a degree of sympathy for the defendants. In his closing address Lord Annally exhorted the jury that if they were not thoroughly convinced in their consciences of the guilt of any or all of the prisoners they should lean on the side of mercy, remembering the maxim "*that it is better ten guilty persons should escape than one innocent person be condemned*". The jury took him at his word and after an absence of only seventeen minutes brought in a verdict of not guilty.

Conclusion

Sir Richard did not easily give up his desire for revenge and this was especially so in the case of William Redmond. After the Dublin trial, the Armagh magistrates indicted him again on other charges but the Armagh petty jurors imitated their Dublin counterparts and found him not guilty. The furious gentlemen of the Grand Jury still wanted him transported on some pretext but the judges would not agree to this and had him entirely cleared.

The three original prisoners who had been sent to Downpatrick were soon released without charge. The Hearts of Steel had been like a blaze of whins. They



The Memorial to Samuel Morelle.

convulsed three counties for a few years and disappeared just as quickly.

This was in part due to a massive emigration of tenant farmers to the Carolinas in America. Many of these were almost immediately involved in the American War of Independence the cause of revolutionaries having much sympathy in Ulster. The saddest part of the whole story was the fate of Samuel Morrell. That there was a real bond of friendship between himself and Sir Richard Johnston is evident from the touching memorial that Sir Richard had erected in his memory in Tullylish Presbyterian Church.

Near this place lie the Remains of the Reverend Samuel Morelle, Dissenting Clergyman of this Parish who was killed on the sixth of March 1772 (in the twenty eighth year of his Age.) bravely defending the House of SIR RICHARD JOHNSTON of Gilford BARONET when attacked by those Lawless Insurgents called Hearts of Oak and Hearts of Steel who, under Pretence of redressing Grievances which never existed, disturbed the Public Peace in that year. He lived to the Welfare of his Country, to the Honour of his Prince, to the Glory of his God. He died fuller of Faith than of Fear, fuller of Resolution than of Pain, fuller of Honour than of Days. His particular Friend SIR RICHARD JOHNSTON BARONET who loved him living and regrets him dead, hath caused this monument to be erected to his Memory.

Manet post Funera Virtus

Others, however, took a cooler view. One contemporary account included the words -

"However unbecoming it was in him to fight with the arm of flesh - especially his own flock."

The superstitious regarded their beliefs as having been confirmed. They remembered his assault on the fairy thorns and shortly after his death some remarkably fine verses circulated in the area attributing his fate to the Queen of Fairies.

Today few facts are remembered of the Battle of Gilford and the Hearts of Steel. Yet one has only to look at the papers of 1772 to realise the impact that it made on Irish opinion at the time.

Rather than praise or blame any of the participants it may be wiser to conclude that they were creatures of their time, as we are of ours, and that they acted as they saw right according to their beliefs.

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