

# MOUNTNORRIS

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*My interest in, and motivation to carry out this research into some aspects of the history of Mountnorris, dates back over 25 years and owes a lot to a gentleman called Billy Higgins.*

*Billy was at that time employed as a street-sweeper in Markethill and, knowing of my interest in local history, he approached me one day and offered to take me on a conducted tour of Mountnorris. My lifestyle at that time was a very busy one with little spare time, but I did find time one May evening to join Billy for a very pleasant walk round Mountnorris village.*



*Billy Higgins*



*Mountnorris Signpost*

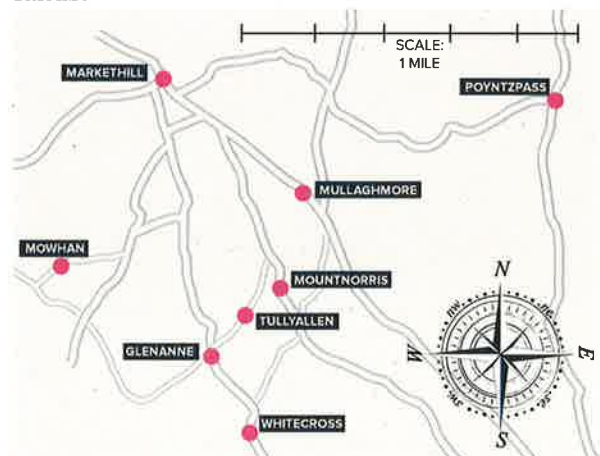
Mountnorris village is situated in the townland of the same name in the Parish of Loughgilly. It is eleven miles south of Armagh City on the old Newry to Armagh road, now identified as the B133. It is seven miles north from Newry, three miles SSW of Markethill, four miles north of Bessbrook and one mile from Whitecross. In earlier times a combination of dense forests and extensive swamps made this a very difficult and dangerous area to pass through. The old name for the area, *Aghenecranagh* (*Achadh na cranncha*), is translated as 'the field of the wooded place'.

## **Mountnorris, the origins of the Name**

A safe passageway through the woods and bogs was of importance for travellers at any time but in times of unrest or war such a passageway took on very considerable strategic importance. During Tudor times, English rule in Ireland

had been extending gradually and by 1590 practically the whole island, with the exception of Ulster, was under English local administration.

As early as 10<sup>th</sup> June 1573, Queen Elizabeth had granted a patent to one Captain Thomas Chatterton, confirming his right to certain land in the O'Hanlon territory of Orior. Captain Chatterton undertook to conquer and colonise this territory before 28<sup>th</sup> March 1578, but he soon discovered that it was easier said than done. He abandoned his plan due to lack of resources and so forfeited his claim to the lands.



*Map showing places on signpost*

In 1695 Sir John Norreys, a highly-experienced English soldier, was appointed military commander in Ireland. With an army he marched north from Waterford to confront the rebel army. North of Dundalk he passed through the mountains by a pass referred to as

'the Moyry'. This was the only suitable route at the time and having control of this pass was of great significance. He does not appear to have had any great difficulty and when he reached Newry, made his headquarters there.

When Norreys advanced from Newry, to confront the enemy, O'Neill's troops retreated to beyond the Blackwater and refused to be drawn out and so the two armies spent the winter in a stand-off, encamped on either side of the river. On the way from Newry, Norreys identified a site near today's village of Mountnorris, as being the ideal place to build a fortress, but time and circumstances prevented him from constructing a fort there.



*Sir John Norreys*

After over-wintering at Armagh, Norreys retired back towards Newry. On the way there he was wounded in the arm and side near Markethill and while his wounds were not fatal, they became gangrenous and he died at Mallow in 1597.

Norreys was succeeded in the post of military commander by Charles Blount who later became Lord Mountjoy. Blount had served under Norreys in various conflicts in Europe and regarded Norreys as his 'master' or teacher.

With Mountjoy were two gentlemen of note, although neither of them was a fighting man. These gentlemen were Fynes Moryson, his



*Lord Mountjoy; Charles Blount*

secretary, and Richard Bartlett a map-maker. Fynes Moryson kept a diary which he later published under the title "***An ITINERARY written by Fynes Moryson Containing HIS TEN YEERS TRAVELL THROUGH THE Twelve Dominions....***"

One of the Dominions was Ireland and in his diary he recorded the incidents and hardships encountered as Mountjoy's army headed north from Dundalk.

He wrote: '*Before his Lordship (Mountjoy) came, Tyrone with his uttermost strength had possessed the Moyry, being a strong fastnesse, as any rebels had, but his Lordship resolved to march over him, if he stopped his way and make him know, that his Kerne could not keep the fortification against the Queen's forces. Many skirmishes fell out happily to us, and two severall dayes the Rebels were beaten out of the trenches with great losse, till at last, upon the eight of October they left the passage cleere.*' Mountjoy then proceeded through the Moyry Pass and encamped and rested at Newry before moving on eight miles north, on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1600, to the vicinity of modern-day Mountnorris, where he again set up camp. Moryson recorded, '*The next morning his Lordship rode some quarter of a mile from the Campe, and viewed a place where Sir John*

*Norreys formerly intended to build a Fort, and liking his choice, set down there with the army to build the same.'*



Site Map

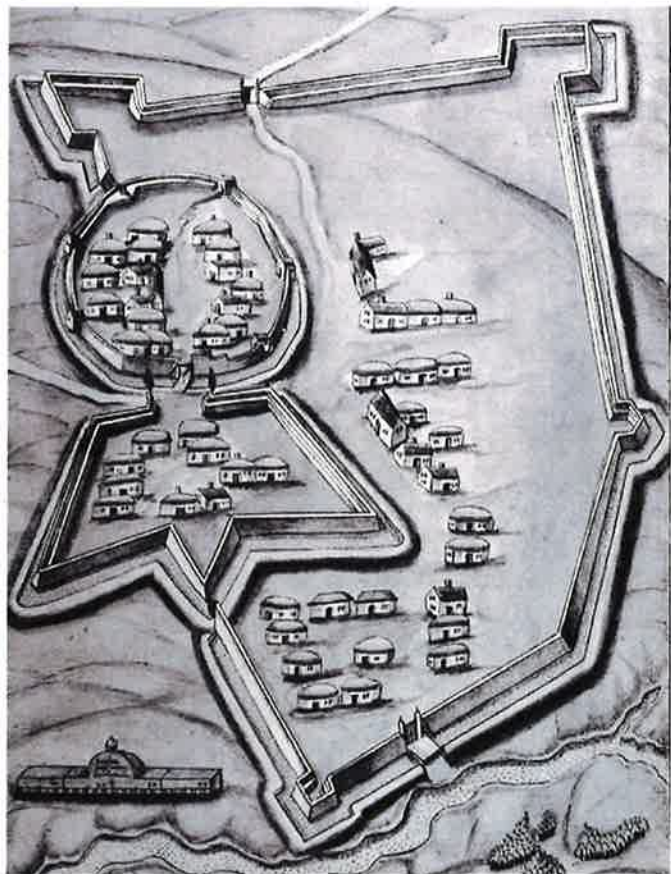
The site was about a mile north of the present village and the fort was completed by 9<sup>th</sup> November. Moryson recorded that Mountjoy named the fort *'Mount Norreys in honour of his master –so he tearmed him under whom he had served his apprenticeship in the warres – and he left therein foure hundred foot under the command of Captaine Edward Blaney with six weekes provision of victuals. ...'*

The site chosen made use of natural defensive features such as the bogs and the Cusher River, and the fortress, which was erected in a week, incorporated a medieval rath already on the site and added the trident-shaped area shown on Bartlett's plan. Later this fortress was considerably strengthened and enlarged.

The original medieval fort is described as a *'bivallate rath'* as it had two ditches. It was modified in 1600 with the inner bank and ditch being levelled. Other changes at that time included creating a pair of defensive ditches and earth embankments to surround the medieval fort so allowing a greater area for accommodation of troops, horses, provisions and munitions. On Richard Bartlett's plan of Mount Norreys fort the original circular rath is at the top left. In 1601 this fortification was considerably extended with the building of the polygonal exterior walls with bastions, an inner walkway and outside the rampart-wall a water-filled ditch and earthen bank. Bartlett's plan

shows that it contained more than fifty houses. These were built mostly of wood. Thirty-six of these were 'of the Irish type' with a circular or elliptical ground plan and thatched; the remainder in the English cottage style. The houses or cabins are described as being either plastered or whitewashed mostly one-storey high and capped with yellow thatch.

In 1601 Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, and his cousin Hugh O'Donnell, Earl of Tirconail, made their last stand against the Elizabethan armies at Kinsale. Their defeat marked the end of the war but it officially ended with the signing of the Treaty of Mellifont in 1603. In 1607 the Earls went into exile, the latter event being referred to as *'The Flight of the Earls'*. From that time on the administration of Ulster was in the hands of English Civil Servants. However, the country was far from settled and the need for forts such as Mount Norreys remained but in more of a vigilant or precautionary role. Many disputes were being settled in assizes and Captain Henry Adderton



Richard Bartlett's Plan of Mountnorris Fort

received a lease of twenty-one years on Mount Norreys Fort in February 1606, undertaking to maintain it and keep the buildings in good repair. In 1608 Sir Josias Bodley, the overseer of fortifications, inspected the fort and reported that the defences had been improved and in 1611 he saw it as *'a place of import, fit to be maintained and supported'*.

Through time the name became Mount 'Norris' and in 1613 Mount Norris was considered as a possible site for a *'Charter Town'*. This status, it seems, didn't depend on the size of the settlement. At any rate it never happened.

Apparently one reason was that the owner of the land, Francis Annesley who had succeeded Captain Adderton, was unwilling to give up his lease to the fort and lands. He was something of a speculator and refused to pay for the incorporation. However, a more likely reason that the idea was abandoned was because of Mountnorris's proximity to Armagh City.

Another proposal, which would have had great significance for the potential growth of Mountnorris but which again came to nothing, was that a Royal School be built there. The High Sheriff of Tyrone reported to James I that the 'best gentlemen' wanted to have schools established for the benefit of their sons and those of their tenants. In reply the King ordered that there should be a free school in each county for the education of youth in learning and religion. By 1614 land was to be transferred for the maintenance of what became known as 'Royal Schools'. However, although 1,522 statute acres, near Mountnorris, was set aside for the purpose, the Royal School was built in Armagh City. While there was no school as such for twenty-five years, a headmaster, Thomas Lydiat, was appointed in 1610. Other Royal Schools were established at Dungannon, Cavan and Raphoe.

These two missed opportunities coupled with the development of a new road to Newry, south of Markethill, greatly curtailed the village's growth.

I have not been able to discover exactly when

the military presence here ended and today there is no trace of Mountnorris Fort other than the remains of the medieval fort it once incorporated.

Locally the chief landowners were the Cope family and the Episcopal Church.

While Mountnorris village grew up about a mile south of the site of the fort, it retained, in a modern form, the name the fort had been given by Mountjoy in 1601. (It is sometimes referred to as *'Portnorris'* or simply *'Port'*, 'port' being the Irish word for bog). The village had a licence to hold a livestock fair and this continued to be held on the second Monday of each month until about 1840.

In 1837 in his *'Topographical Dictionary'* Samuel Lewis states that Mountnorris is situated, *"at the southern end of a morass extending from Poyntzpass a distance of five miles and lies at the foot of the Belleek Mountain."* At that time, the village consisted of ten houses mostly *"well-built"*. The village was initially on the main coach-road between Newry and Armagh but the construction of a new Armagh road to Newry south of Markethill, which by-passed Mountnorris hindered the village's development. Farming, - growing flax, potatoes and corn - was the traditional local occupation but the Industrial Revolution, which began in Britain around 1760, soon made its presence felt in Co Armagh.

The Cusher and Mowhan Rivers have always been very important features of the area, and despite several major drainage projects much of the land around Mountnorris is still liable to flooding. However, on a more positive note, the potential of these rivers as a source of power was soon recognised and by the latter years of the eighteenth century there were several flax and corn mills in the area. In his book *'The Millers and Mills of Ireland'*, Wm. E. Hogg lists nine flax mills in and around Mountnorris townland. In Mountnorris townland William Byers and William Byrnes owned flax mills powered by water from the Cusher, while in nearby Derrycughan townland Wm. Orr operated both corn and flax mills, using water from the Mowhan River as a source of power. Another sign of the changing times came when



***Derrycughan Mill***

William Atkinson established a bleaching and spinning works at Glenanne around 1816. He had been leased 200 acres by the Earl of Gosford and soon became a major employer locally, spinning American cotton. In order for Atkinson's factory to be successful, a reliable source of power was essential and this was provided by using water from Shaw's Lake. Unlike the mills referred to above which were small-scale operations, Atkinson's factory was a major project and a much more sophisticated business. As well as a water-wheel it included steam power. There were boiling, lapping and warp rooms as well as a forge.

The outbreak of the American Civil War (1861-1865) caused the supply of American cotton to be greatly disrupted and this led to the factory changing from cotton to linen production at that time. Producing high-quality textiles continued on the site for almost 175 years and during that time the Glenanne Factory was at the forefront of textile technology. While the Glenanne mill provided much-needed employment, in common with many other rural areas, large-scale emigration in the

nineteenth century had a lasting impact on the Mountnorris district.

'*Bassett's Directory for County Armagh*' published in 1888, gives some details of Mountnorris at that time. Doctor Young at the Dispensary was responsible for the health of the community, the Post-master was Mr Robert Walker, Sergeant Latimer of the R.I.C. was in command at the Police station and Mr Hugh Morrison kept order in Mountnorris National School.

At that time the village had two drapers, four grocers and a brick manufacturer but no public house. However, at least two of the grocers were 'spirit-grocers', licenced to sell spirits. Mountnorris acquired a reputation for rowdiness and it appears that Richard Irwin, the local process-server at the time was kept quite busy.

For the past fifty years the firm Johnstons of Mountmorris has been supplying the important poultry industry with day-old chicks. This successful family enterprise is run by Muriel and Willie Johnston.

The Mountnorris area can claim connection with several notable persons.



*Andrew Trew Wood*

**Andrew Trew Wood** who was to become a prominent Canadian industrialist and politician was the son of local merchant David Wood. Born in Mountnorris in 1826, he attended school at Derrycughan and Loughgilly. In the early 1840's he emigrated to Canada, where he found employment in a large hardware store in Toronto. His potential was soon recognised and he was transferred to Hamilton, Ontario to manage the company's large store there. He was ambitious and able and became involved in various activities such as the developing railway system. Within ten years had acquired his own business, a smelting works producing pig-iron and steel. In 1874 he was elected as a Liberal member to the Canadian Parliament and served three terms. By then a millionaire, he was a close friend of Wilfrid Laurier, Canada's highly-regarded Prime Minister who, in 1901, nominated him to the Canadian Senate. He died in 1903.

Another individual of note with a direct association with Mountnorris was **Sir John McEwen**, eighteenth Prime Minister of



*Sir John McEwen*

Australia. His grandfather William Henry McEwen had served the Mountnorris Presbyterian Congregation for thirty years, from 1847 to 1877. His son David, a pharmacist, emigrated to Australia and his son John was born there in 1900.

After a spell in the army, John McEwen became an extensive sheep and cattle-farmer in Victoria. He was an active member of various farming organisations and in 1934 was elected to the Australian House of Representatives as a member of the Country Party. He occupied various ministries and became one of the most influential members of the government. In 1967 when the Prime Minister, Harold Holt, disappeared while swimming and was later presumed dead John McEwen was appointed as interim Prime Minister until a new leader of the Liberal Party was selected. The post of Prime Minister was offered to John McEwen but he declined. He retired from politics in 1971, having spent 36 years in parliament. He was knighted that year and died in 1980.

**Sir John Hall Magowan**, the son of William Hall Magowan and his wife Sara Ann, was born at Tullyherron in 1893. He attended Mountnorris National School before transferring to the Royal School, Armagh. In 1911 he moved to Trinity College, Dublin where he specialised in Modern Languages. While at Trinity he joined the University's Officers' Training Corps and upon the outbreak of the war in 1914 he was part of the



*Sir John Hall Magowan  
with his Mother, Sara Ann.*

British Expeditionary Force which was sent to France. He served in the Royal Field Artillery and was wounded in September 1916. In 1918 he married Winifred Ray whom he had met while they were classmates at Trinity. Demobbed in 1919, he successfully applied for a post in the diplomatic service. He was posted to Germany as a Junior Vice-Consul and in later years he acted in a consular capacity in such places as Berlin, Washington and Haiti. He was knighted in 1946 and became the British Ambassador to Venezuela in 1948. While on a visit home in 1951, he died suddenly at his sister's home in Rostrevor, Co Down. Sir John Hall Magowan was buried in his native Mountnorris.



*The Cusher*

*That evening walk round Mountnorris all those years ago with Billy Higgins, during which he so enthusiastically pointed out various places of interest, was made doubly memorable for me as we ended up at the home of Willie and Muriel Johnston for supper and a pleasant chat before parting company. However, Billy's infectious enthusiasm had implanted the germ of an idea in my mind that, sometime in the future, I would take the time to learn a little more about the origins of Mountnorris, the people and the place and although that germ has lain dormant for a long time, there was always the hope that, someday, it might germinate and bear some fruit.*