



## St. Columb's Park House – A History



*Shipquay Street, early 19th century*

Shipquay Street in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with St. Columb's Park House across the river in the distance, giving a good impression of the distance between the House and the centre of town.

Source: W.S. Ferguson, A.J. Rowan and J.J. Tracey, *List of Historic Buildings Groups of Buildings Areas of Architectural Importance in and near the City of Derry*, (Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, 1970) p. 3.

*Clooney, Chatham, Hill, Cooke and St. Columb's are names that have been associated with the House and the surrounding area for the past 1500 years. They represent the diversity of the history connected to a building located next to the city of Derry with roots that extend back to the sixth century.*

## **Clooney Origins**

Before the house was built, the area of St. Columbkille Park was more memorable for acts of violence rather than peace and reconciliation. The ruins of St. Breckan's Church or Cluain I (Clooney) can be seen nearby, the site of a church and graveyard which was active throughout the Middle Ages. The *Annals of the Four Masters* note in 1197 that the Normans, establishing themselves on the north coast having been in Ireland the previous two decades, went on a predatory excursion to the port of Derry, and plundered Cluain I, Eanach, and Dearg Bruach<sup>1</sup>. The plundering party may have viewed the town of Doire across the river and went no closer.

In the later Middle Ages, the politics of religion dominated the important events in the church's history, however, unlike the religious and political issues that affect the House today, it was contemporary ecclesiastical affairs which brought ups and downs for St. Breckan's. The Archbishop of Armagh John Colton visited the site on his famous 1397 *Visitation of Derry*, while Nicholas Weston, who was Bishop of Derry in 1467-88 dismantled the building so the stone could be used for a new Episcopal palace<sup>2</sup>. Fortunately, in 1585 Bishop Redmond O'Gallagher rebuilt the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael O'Cleary, *The Annals of Ireland by the Four Masters Translated into English by Owen Connellan*, (2003) p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Henry A. Jefferies and Ciarán Devlin(eds.), *History of the Diocese of Derry from Earliest Times*, (2003) p. 62.

church, whose ruins are still there today, making it perhaps the oldest building in the city<sup>3</sup>. Before the opening of the park to the public in 1939, workmen excavating the site found the bones of monks buried in a circle around the church.

The site became important once again during the 1689 Siege of Derry as its strategic position high on the east bank of the river made it highly effective for the besieging army's artillery. The most destructive battery involved in the bombardment of the city was the cannon placed nearby in Stronge's Orchard, just opposite Shipquay Street<sup>4</sup>. However, things did not go entirely smoothly for the encampment as we are told that in a field near where the house stands now, the cattle for King James's army were all slaughtered<sup>5</sup>. The location became known as Butcher's Hollow and could be found until the redevelopment of the Park in the 1960s.

## **Chatham Lodge**

In 1788, a naval officer named Lieutenant John Rea built the original house in the park among sixty acres in which he planted thousands of trees, and named it Chatham Lodge. The building came at a formative stage in the city's architectural history as the flamboyant F.A. Hervey had become the city's bishop in 1768. He restored the cathedral and erected many churches. By the 1780s, the city had expanded beyond its walls, and although Chatham Lodge remained firmly in the countryside, the Waterside was now directly connected to the city by a wooden bridge built in 1790<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> T.H. Mullin, *Ulster's Historic City: Derry Londonderry*, (1986) p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> *Sentinel*, 03/10/62.

<sup>6</sup> W.S. Ferguson, A.J. Rowan and J.J. Tracey, *Ulster Architectural Heritage Society List of Historic Buildings Groups of Buildings Areas of Architectural Importance in and near the City of Derry*, (1970)

John Rea married Louisa Blacker, the daughter of a Reverend from Armagh and they had a daughter, Elizabeth Sophia Rea. Elizabeth went on to marry George Hill on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1831 in St. Columba's, allowing the Rea estate to move into the hands of the wealthy Hill family who were baronets of Brooke Hall<sup>7</sup>. The Hill family crest can still be seen today above the main doorway to the house.



The Hill family crest, which can be seen above the main entrance.

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<sup>7</sup> Sir Bernard Burke, *Burke's Peerage and Baronetages*, 22<sup>nd</sup> edition (Harrison, 1860) pp. 521-22.



View of the Park (c. 1890) from St. Columba's Cathedral, illustrating its location to the town centre. The House can be seen nestled between the trees at the centre of the image.

Source: Brian Mitchell (ed.), *On the Banks of the Foyle*, (Friar's Bush Press, 1989) p. 2.

## Literary Connection

St. Columba's Park House also has its place in literary history as novelist William Makepeace Thackeray of *Vanity Fair* fame stayed for a night in September 1840. In his journey around Ireland doing research for his *Irish Sketch-Book*, he stopped at the 'the pretty lodge of Saint Columba' and left a letter which 'was the cause of much delightful hospitality'<sup>8</sup>. He refrains from telling us the exact details of what happened, but informed us:

'what popular descriptions might be written of the hospitalities of St. Columba of the jovialities of the mess of the the Regiment, of the speeches made and the songs sung, and the devilled turkey at twelve o'clock, and the

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<sup>8</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Irish-Sketchbook*, [http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/t/thackeray/william\\_makepeace/irish/chapter31.html](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/t/thackeray/william_makepeace/irish/chapter31.html), accessed 18 November 2013.

headache afterwards; all which events could be described in an exceedingly facetious manner.<sup>9</sup>

After his jovial experience in the city, the novelist proceeds through the snowy hills of Donegal to Ballyshannon, dreaming of the hospitality back in Dublin, and no doubt, back in St. Columba.

## **Serving the British Empire**

Generations of the Hill family were born and married in the house in the nineteenth century, some of whom went on to have illustrious careers. George and Elizabeth's son, John Hill, was born 4<sup>th</sup> February 1833, became the 4<sup>th</sup> Baronet Hill, of Brooke Hall and fought in the Indian Mutiny of 1857<sup>10</sup>. John went on to marry Charlotte Elizabeth Blyth in St. Columba. They had eight children, one of whom, Henry Blyth, became the 6<sup>th</sup> Baronet. Henry Blyth followed in his father's footsteps by having a successful career in the military. He fought in the Nile Expedition of 1898 at Khartoum, and was decorated with the award of the Companions, Distinguished Service Order. He held the offices of Governor of Berber and Bahr el Gazal before fighting in World War I<sup>11</sup>.

## **Reconnecting with the Sea**

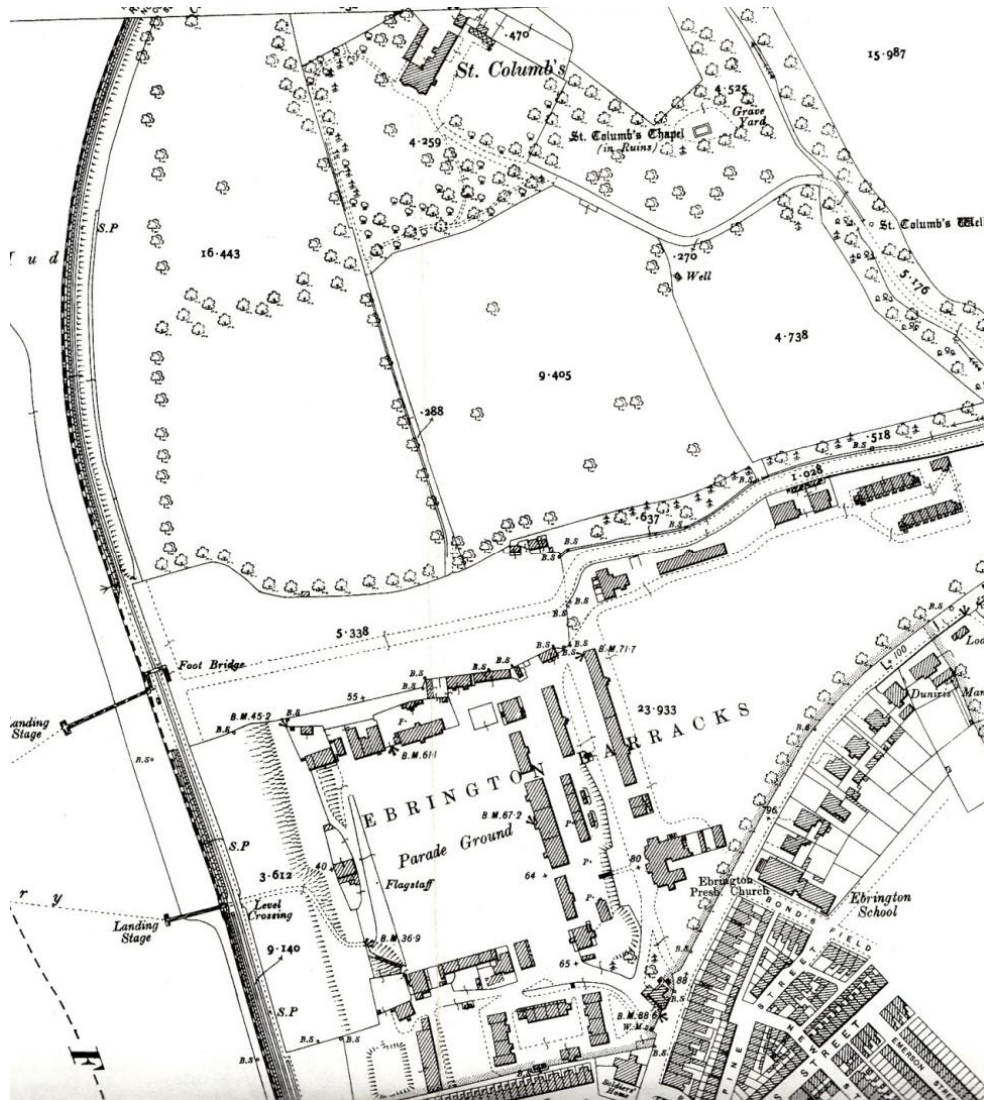
Sometime following 1890 the house seems to have fallen into the hands of the Cooke family. This resumed the house's connection with the sea, a century after a naval officer built the original

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Sir Bernard Burke, *Burke's Peerage and Baronetages*, 22<sup>nd</sup> edition (Harrison, 1860) pp. 521-22.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



Map of the site in 1907, showing the expansion of the Ebrington Barracks into St. Columb's demesne and the land surrounding the House.

Source: Derry/Londonderry 1905, (Alan Godfrey, 1986), originally published by the Director General at the Ordnance Survey Office, Phoenix Park, Dublin (1907).

Lodge. The Cooke family owned one of the two big companies facilitating the mass emigration which took place from the River Foyle. Records show at one stage they owned twenty ships, helping to make Derry the hub of the northwest for emigrants

bound for destinations in the U.S. and Canada<sup>12</sup>. In this period the local gentry would have used the building like the typical manor house of its age - in contrast to the house today, under the Cooke tenure the house was ~~forbidden ground~~ to anyone<sup>13</sup>.



Joseph Cooke (centre) and his six children outside St. Columba's Park House on 24<sup>th</sup> October 1895.

Source: Brian Mitchell (ed.), *On the Banks of the Foyle*, (Friar's Bush Press, 1989) p. 50.

## Build up to War

In the build up to the Second World War, the house was under the stewardship of the Nicholl family from 1935. The interior was very grand, adorned with Greek statues, high decorative ceilings and hosting ballroom events. The outhouses included barns, stables, a granary and an old garage; beyond this were an orchard, vegetable garden and green house<sup>14</sup>. When the park opened to the public in 1939, it was viewed as a happy culmination to

<sup>12</sup> Londonderry Harbour, 'Derry as an Emigration Port', <http://www.londonderryport.com/images/Derry%20emigration%20overview.pdf>, accessed 22 November 2013.

<sup>13</sup> E. Tracey, *Old Waterside*

<sup>14</sup> Robert Nicholl, 'St. Columba's Park House' in *Waterside Voices*, Spring 2001.



negotiations which had been in progress since October 1937. The Corporation acquired the property, with the attached interests for a total of £4,972<sup>15</sup>.

However, Britain's war effort evolved, St. Columba's was requisitioned by the British Army and a directive from the War Ministry told the Nicholl family they had ten days to find new accommodation<sup>16</sup>. The location of the house to both Ebrington Barracks and Clooney Base rendered it a valuable asset to the war effort. In the early years of the war a large, temporary hospital was built between the house and Ebrington Barracks which catered for any Royal Navy personnel injured in during the Battle of the Atlantic<sup>17</sup>. The colourful U.S. presence in Derry lasted from January 1942 till August 1944 involved the house due to the fact that Navcommsta Londonderry, a major American naval communications command post, was based in Clooney. We are told the house was used to station some of these troops.

## **After the War**

When the war ended, the hospital was considered too good to be dismantled and was leased to the local health board in 1949 along with the house, becoming known as St. Columba's Hospital. The house itself became the nurses' home for the institution and although some of the ballroom dance events of the early days occasionally returned, the primary function of the hospital initially was to nurse patients suffering from tuberculosis. Subsequently, chest diseases and orthopaedic conditions became the principal

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<sup>15</sup> *Sentinel*, 04/03/1939

<sup>16</sup> Robert Nicholl, 'St. Columba's Park House, contd.' in *Waterside Voices*, Summer 2001.

<sup>17</sup> History of Ebrington, <http://www.ilex-urc.com/Sites/Ebrington/Ebrington-History-and-Masterplan.aspx>, accessed 21 November 2013.

ailments treated here. The Health Board did not renew their lease on the site in 1985 and though the hospital which had mostly comprised of huts was demolished, the house itself had become a listed building in 1979 and stayed.



The house today

## **Decline and Reopening**

Sadly the house was not cared for and fell in to dilapidation and vandalism through the rest of the 1980s and early 1990s. Renovations were completed in 1993 and since then, St. Columba's Park House has been developed as a neutral venue where groups and individuals come together to work on a range of cross-community programmes. Another investment came in 2010 and an extension was added to the house the following year, which together with the opening of the Peace Bridge makes this old manor house a state of the art conference and reconciliation facility close to the centre of the city.

## Timeline

<b>1788</b>	Captain John Rea builds original Chatham Lodge
<b>1831</b>	John Rea's daughter Elizabeth marries George Hill in the house.
<b>1840</b>	William Makepeace Thackeray visits the house.
<b>1890s</b>	House moves to the Cooke family.
<b>1939</b>	The park outside the grounds of the House is made open to the public.
<b>1949</b>	House is leased to the local health board.
<b>1979</b>	The building becomes a listed building.
<b>1985</b>	The Health Board fails to renew their lease on the house, allowing it to fall into dilapidation.
<b>1994</b>	St. Columba's Park House activity and reconciliation centre established.
<b>2011</b>	Centre is refurbished and extended.

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