

SAMPLE OF TOWNLAND HISTORY

Mary Kate hails from the townland of Ballyellis, approximately nine miles from Gorey town. Ballyellis is most famous for the **Battle of Ballyellis** that took place there on 30 June 1798¹.

The Lead up to the 1798 Rebellion

The Irish Rebellion of 1798 was an uprising against British rule in Ireland and lasted from May to September 1798. The United Irishmen, a republican revolutionary group influenced by the ideas of the recent American and French revolutions, were the main organising force behind the rebellion. It was led by Presbyterians angry at being shut out of power by the Anglican establishment, who were joined by Catholics, who made up the majority of the population. Many Irish Northern Protestants sided with the British, resulting in the conflict taking on the appearance of a sectarian civil war in many areas, with atrocities on both sides.

When France joined the Americans in support of their Revolutionary War, London called for volunteers to join militias to defend Ireland against the threat of invasion from France as the British forces had been dispatched to America (War of Independence). Many thousands joined the Irish Volunteers. In 1782 they forced the Crown to grant the landed Ascendancy self-rule and a more independent parliament known as Grattan's Parliament. In 1793, parliament passed laws allowing Catholics with some property to vote, but they could neither be elected nor appointed as state officials. Liberals of the Ascendancy (including Jervis White of Ballyellis House) were seeking greater rights for the people as well as an end to religious discrimination, and were inspired by the French Revolution which had taken place in a Catholic country².

In December 1796, Theobald Wolfe Tone successfully dispatched a force of fourteen thousand French veteran troops under General Lazare Hoche which arrived off the coast of Ireland at Bantry Bay, County Cork, the 'Expedition d'Irland' after eluding the Royal Navy. However, invasion was averted due to heavy storms and to the indecisiveness of the leaders. The despairing Wolfe Tone remarked, 'England has had its luckiest escape since the Armada'. The French fleet was forced to return home and the veteran army intended to spearhead the invasion of Ireland was split up and sent to fight in other factions of the French Revolutionary War³.

In the north-east, mostly Presbyterian rebels led by Henry Joy McCracken rose in County Antrim on 6 June 1798. They briefly held most of the county, but the rising there collapsed

¹ T. Croflin, Esq. Vol I *Memoirs of Joseph Holt, General of the Irish Rebels 1798* (1838) accessed at <https://books.google.ie/books> [accessed 4 February 2019]

² Helen Litton, *Irish Rebellions 1798 to 1921* (1998)

³ Stuart Reid, *Armies of the Irish Rebellion 1798* (2011)

following defeat at Antrim town. In County Down, after initial success at Saintfield, rebels led by Henry Munro were defeated in the longest battle of the rebellion at Ballynahinch.

The rebels had most success in the south-eastern county of Wexford where they seized control of the county at The Harrow and at Gorey, Carnew, Oulart Hill, and Forth Mountain near Wexford town and for three weeks the rebels had control of the town, the Wexford Republic. However, a series of bloody defeats at the Battle of New Ross, Battle of Arklow [Co Wicklow], and the Battle of Bunclody prevented the effective spread of the rebellion beyond the county borders. Twenty thousand troops eventually poured into Wexford and defeated the rebels at the Battle of Vinegar Hill on 21 June. Between five hundred and one thousand rebels died at Vinegar Hill with a loss of some one hundred government troops. While the battle effectively brought an end to the Wexford Republic, the surviving rebels split into two columns and escaped from Wexford. One column went into the midlands which included Father John Murphy, and the other to Wicklow where a guerrilla campaign ensued led by General Joseph Holt and Captain Michael Dwyer.

The Battle of Ballyellis



Ballyellis House already derelict by the end of the nineteenth century. Photo circa 1900 (Lawrence Collection NLI Dublin)

The Battle of Ballyellis was fought on 30 June 1798 in the aftermath of the Battle of Vinegar Hill. Ballyellis is situated on the Wicklow/Wexford border near Carnew. A column of rebels numbering about one thousand, accompanied by women and juveniles under General Joseph Holt, was attempting to escape into the Wicklow mountains. They continuously altered course to confuse the British forces. Holt's men had spotted the pursuing troops in Monaseed and organised an ambush on the road in the townland of Ballyellis some two miles away. The ambush site was on a bend in the road bordered by high, thick ditches of crab and thorn on both sides, a high wall belonging to an old deer park and a dyke five feet deep⁴. The road was also blocked with wagons and a small force placed on the roadway to lure the cavalry into the trap. Upon spotting the small force standing on the road, the pursuing British quickened their pace and charged forwards, assuming that they were facing only the rear-guard of the fleeing

⁴ T. Croflan, Esq. Vol I *Memoirs of Joseph Holt, General of the Irish Rebels 1798* (1838) accessed at <https://books.google.ie/books> [accessed 4 February 2019]

column. The government troops fell for the ruse and charged the apparent rear-guard of the fleeing column only to be met with rebel fire from three sides. The rear-ranks quickly fled with a few more soldiers escaping by jumping their mounts over the ditch but the rebels organised a relentless pursuit of the soldiers who were tracked and killed through the adjoining fields. In his memoirs, General Holt talks of the black trumpeter Anthony King being ‘most tenacious at life and taking more piking than five white men’ before he died. A pike man severed his ears to take his gold earrings *Memoirs of Joseph Holt* at pp. 79-80⁵. He also tells of a boy piking a militia and not being able to remove the pike. The boy then takes a purse from his pocket containing twenty guineas. The boy asks the general to take care of the money. The general later gives the money to the boy’s father at pp82-83. In the ambush and subsequent pursuit the military, the Ancient Britons, lost over sixty troops (including a French émigré) and two officers were killed. There were no rebel casualties. The Monaseed patriot and Brigadier General and leader of Napoleon’s Irish Brigade, Miles Byrne, describes the battle of Ballyellis as follows:

A plaque erected about a quarter mile from the monument where some of the casualties of the battle were buried



‘The remains or ruins of an old deer park wall on the right-hand side of the road ran along for about half a mile; in many parts it was not more than three or four feet high. All along the inside of this our gunsmen and pikemen were placed. On the left hand side of the road, there was an immense ditch with swampy ground, which few horses could be found to leap. In this advantageous situation for our men the battle began ; the gunsmen, half -covered, firing from behind the wall, whilst the English cavalry, though well mounted, could only make use of their carbines and pistols, for with their sabres they were unable to ward off the thrusts of our pikemen, who sallied out on them in the most determined manner.

Thus in less than an hour this infamous regiment, which had been the horror of the country, was slain to the last man, as well as the few yeomen cavalry who had the courage to take part in the action. For all those who quit their horses and got into the fields were followed and piked on the marshy ground. The greater part of the

⁵ T. Croflan, Esq. Vol I *Memoirs of Joseph Holt, General of the Irish Rebels 1798* (1838) accessed at <https://books.google.ie/books> [accessed 4 February 2019]

numerous cavalry corps which accompanied the Ancient Britons, kept on a rising ground to the right side of the road at some distance during the battle, and as soon as the result of it was known, they fled in the most cowardly way in every direction, both dismayed and disappointed that they had no opportunity on this memorable day of murdering the stragglers, as was their custom on such occasions'.⁶

What is interesting though was that Miles Byrne talked about White of Ballyellis House, located just a stone's throw from the scene of the battle. The matter concerned local men who were badly treated by their captain Mr Jervis A. White, who was raising foot corps in the Irish Volunteers, circa 1796, supposedly to fight against the French if battle were to ensue against the British in Ireland. A couple of them travelled to Dublin to enter into a lawsuit against White. Counsellor Thomas Addis Emmet represented them. He saw it would afford a good opportunity of punishing and exposing White who selfishly thought of nothing but his own advancement. The men were represented pro bono. Emmet also got all men treated badly by White to sign a class action type of document. These men, trained in combat, subsequently joined the United Irishmen and fought in the 1798 Rebellion. *Memoirs of Miles Byrne* a pp. 16-17.

However, other accounts of Mr White show that although he was leader of the Carnew Yeomen leading up to the 1798 rebellion, he had strong political views that were liberal in nature, and was even considered to sympathise with the United Irishmen. Because of these suspicions his corps of Yeomen was disbanded before the summer of 1798⁷. The fact that Ballyellis House was not burned by the United Irishmen during the battle shows that Mr White had the respect of the locals.



Ballyellis Monument placed at the beginning of the battle site showing the outhouse ruins to the left of photo - all that remains of the Ballyellis Estate 2019.

⁶ *Memoirs of Miles Byrne*: Byrne Miles, 1780-1862 accessed at <http://www.archive.org/stream/memoirsofmilesbyrnedjvu.txt> [accessed on 4 February 2019]

⁷ *Askamore Parish Journal* Vol 2 (1998)

Aftermath to the Battle of Ballyellis

The news of the rebel victory came as a shock to the authorities in Dublin Castle who had assumed that the offensive capabilities of the rebels had been finished at the Battle of Vinegar Hill. Reports of the defeat were downplayed and the scale of losses withheld from the general public, but the military now recognized Wicklow as the main theatre of rebel operations and began to transfer troops there in anticipation of a new anti-insurgency campaign.

The dispersed rebels spread in two columns through the midlands, Kilkenny, and finally towards Ulster. The last remnants of these forces fought on until their final defeat on 14 July at the battles of Knightstown Bog, County Meath and Ballyboughal, County Dublin⁸.

On 22 August, a French army comprising about one thousand French soldiers under General Humbert landed in County Mayo. About five thousand local rebels joined them, defeating the British at Castlebar. They set up a short-lived 'Irish Republic'. This sparked some supportive uprisings in Longford and Westmeath which were quickly defeated, and the main force was defeated at Battle of Ballinamuck in County Longford on 8 September 1798. The Irish Republic had only lasted twelve days from its declaration of independence to its collapse. The French troops who surrendered were transported back to France in exchange for British Prisoners of War, but hundreds of the captured Irish rebels were executed. This episode of the 1798 Rebellion became a major event in the heritage and collective memory of the West of Ireland and was commonly known in Irish as *Bliain na bhFrancach* and in English as 'The Year of the French'.

On 12 October 1798, a larger French force consisting of three thousand men, and including Wolfe Tone himself, attempted to land in County Donegal. They were intercepted by the Royal Navy and finally surrendered after a three-hour battle without ever landing in Ireland. Wolfe Tone was tried by court-martial in Dublin and found guilty. He asked for death by firing squad, but when this was refused, Tone cheated the hangman by slitting his own throat in prison on 12 November, and died a week later.

Small fragments of the great rebel armies of the summer of 1798 survived for a number of years and waged a form of guerrilla warfare in several counties. In County Wicklow, General Joseph Holt fought on until his negotiated surrender in autumn 1798. It was not until the failure of Robert Emmet's rebellion in 1803 that the last organised rebel forces under Captain Michael Dwyer capitulated. Small pockets of rebel resistance had also survived within Wexford and the last rebel group under James Corcoran was not vanquished until February 1804.

⁸ Daniel Gahan, *The People's Rising: The Great Wexford Rebellion of 1798* (1995)

The Aftermath to the 1798 Rebellion

The Act of Union, passed in August 1800, came into effect on 1 January 1801 and took away the measure of autonomy granted to Ireland's Protestant Ascendancy. It was passed largely in response to the rebellion and to years of misrule of the Ascendancy⁹.

You can also commission a detailed account of the history of the town, village or townland your ancestor hailed from. This will include recorded history, testimonies of local historians in addition to stories of the customs and folklore in the surrounding areas.

⁹ Helen Litton, *Irish Rebellions 1798 to 1921* (1998)