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Larch Hill, A Happy Rural Seat of Various Views

by

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INTRODUCTION

The landscaped grounds of Larch Hill, Co. Meath incorporate one of the rare examples of a private garden which has evolved over the course of almost two hundred and fifty years where family histories and popular garden trends are layered and interwoven. Since the early eighteenth century, succeeding generations have transformed this rural retreat into what is termed a *ferme ornée* or ornamental farm. This study gives an account of the changes which have taken place up to the present time.

No body of work exists so far which charts its creation and development and within the scope of this study a particular focus has been chosen. Although, like all artistic creations, gardens can be analysed from an historical, political, social and symbolic point of view, it is the aesthetic and horticultural aspects of the restoration which are explained here. A detailed discussion on the extensive architectural restoration work is outside the scope of this study.

The archive for Larch Hill is not substantial. No original documentation in the form of journals or diaries dealing with the farm's ornamentation, detailing work in progress, is available.

Trawling through topographical journals on Ireland, during the eighteenth/nineteenth century produced no references to Larch Hill or Phepotstown. Meath Archaeological and Historical Society could provide no information relating to the farm.

This lack of written source material in the form of plans or other surviving records is not unusual as the laying out and embellishment of farms was the work of an individual in the majority of cases.

The most important book on the subject of the landscape buildings at Larch Hill, entitled *The Follies and Garden Buildings of Ireland* was written by James Howley in 1993. Edward Malins and the Knight of Glin make no reference whatever to Larch Hill in their book, *Lost Demesnes, Irish Landscape Gardening 1660-1845*. The volume, *The Buildings of North Leinster* by Alistair Rowan and Christine Casey contains a short

description of the follies on the farm. A report commissioned by Michael de las Casas and prepared by John Redmill, Architect specialising in the renovation of eighteenth century properties, dated September 1994, assessing the degree of disrepair of the follies and features was accessed at the practice of James Howley, Architect.

The Ordnance Survey Name Books at the National Library, which are a typescript of the notes of the original Ordnance Surveyors, proved a valuable source of information. Besides this, the beautiful volumes of Shenstone's poetry and *Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening* were made available at the National Library. For comparative information, the early issues of the *Garden History Journal* which contain long accounts of the early *ferme ornées* at the Leasowes, and Woburn Farm were accessed at the Botanic Gardens and were of great assistance.

The present owners of Larch Hill, Michael and Louisa de las Casas, were generous with their time and information during my many visits to the farm. Unless otherwise stated, all the opinions expressed by Ruairi Canavan, horticulturist and garden designer on site at Larch Hill and Michael de las Casas are derived from the interviews of the 7th August 1998 at Larch Hill. Much of the material has been compiled from an interview with Patrick Bowe, architect, garden designer and author on the 4th August 1998. The National Library, National Archives, Irish Architectural Archive and Map Department at Trinity College have given me access to Ordnance Survey maps, original photographs on file, and provided me with relevant photocopies.

Having attended the recent Association of Garden Trusts Conference at Priorslee near Birmingham, England, it was possible for delegates to visit the Leasowes at Halesowen, near Hagley, the site of William Shenstone's celebrated *ferme ornée* currently under restoration. Speakers at the conference included David Jacques, author, lecturer and consultant who examined the early ideas and experiments in combining beauty with utility. Tom Oliver, Property Manager at Croome Park, Worcestershire for the National Trust, discussed how the tradition of the *ferme ornée* might be employed as design guidance for the future. Paul Walshe, National Heritage Advisor to the Countryside Commission, Senior Policy Advisor on land, countryside and natural heritage to the Heritage Lottery Fund emphasised the need for a change of attitude towards the

countryside. Landscape Architect Sally Orton, discussed her responsibility for landscape design, arboricultural services, grounds maintenance and the Restoration Project at the Leasowes.

The Conference examined the origins of the *ferme ornée*, its development and its demise by the end of the eighteenth century. The farm at Larch Hill is however my primary source in that, in my opinion, it is a landscape worthy of restoration and preservation with its surviving follies and features including the newly restored lake, woodland and Gothick farmyard with walled gardens. The *ferme ornée* at Larch Hill is all the more important as it would appear to be the only known, intact *ferme ornée* in Ireland which is still a working farm. It is always unwise to claim that something is unique or the biggest or best or oldest, therefore it is safer to say that it is the most complete and integrated *ferme ornée* in Ireland that I am aware of.

Description of the Features and Follies.

In order to become enamoured with a situation, persons should be carried to it in fine weather, and, if possible when the heart is mild, un-prepossessed and susceptible of whatever impressions may be made on it. Much, if not the greater part, depends upon the circumstances at our first view of a place.
(Loudon, 1806, p. 676)

The beautifully elevated situation of Larch Hill house commands views of woodland, water and follies with distant views of Maynooth's Pugin Spire and the Dublin and Wicklow Mountains. Although Larch Hill lacks the advantage of contour, valleys and cascading streams, the views towards the Dublin Mountains are spectacular. The creators of this landscape garden utilised watercourses and woodland as the raw materials, creating an ideal landscape to replace, in their view, an aesthetically less pleasing one. The sixty-three acre farm is now considerably less than its original size prior to fragmentation in 1993. The Estate Map which hangs in the front hallway of the farmhouse is dated 1838 and depicts the layout of 265 acres of farmland (Plate No. I). This map is possibly a project drawing, which was never fully carried out. The Ordnance Survey maps suggest that there were large scale developments around the house, including the woodland walled garden, shell tower, dairy, Gothick stables, lakes, fish-ponds, eel-house and various other follies, consistent with fashions during the eighteenth century. The Estate Map and Ordnance Survey maps are a window on the minds of the occupiers of the farm two centuries ago. The house has been dated by Desmond Guinness as being built circa 1750-1780 (de las Casas, 1998 interview). The fact that the *ferme ornée* movement was current in the early eighteenth century does not imply that Larch Hill is an early eighteenth century *ferme ornée*. The actual date remains to be confirmed. Isaac Butler in his journal of 1744 notes that the best quarries in Ireland were to be found at nearby Moynalvey (Butler, 1744, M.S.). However, the follies are built in a similar manner of primitive rubble masonry with granite lintels, all roughly lime-rendered originally (de las Casas, 1998, interview). These rustic structures, more Roman than Greek, do not conform to any particular style.

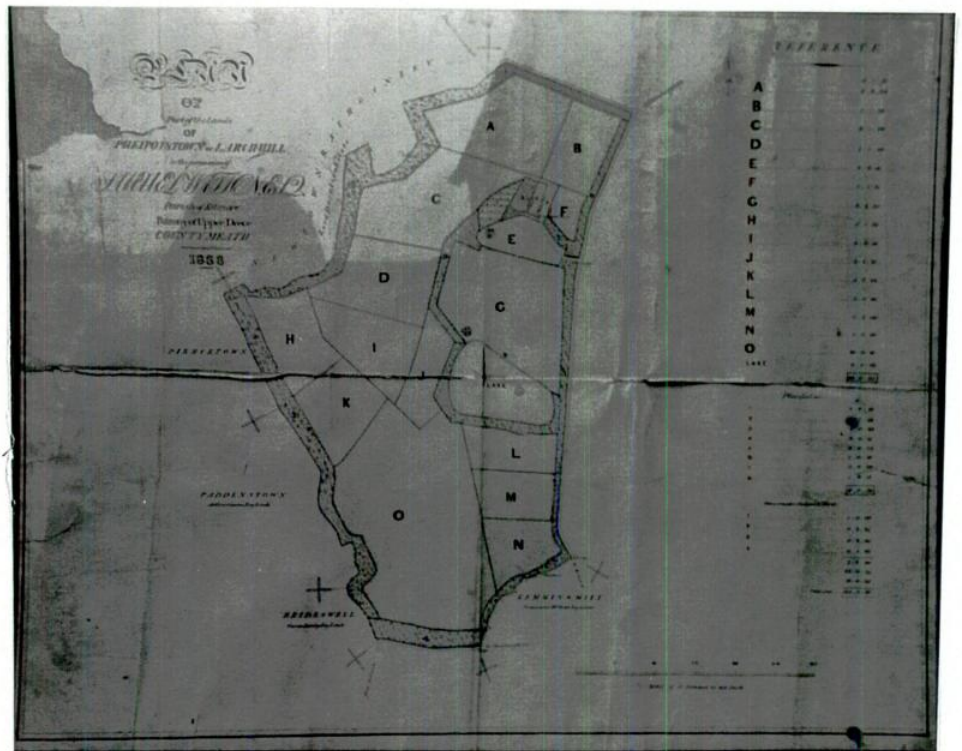


Plate I
Estate Map Of 1838.

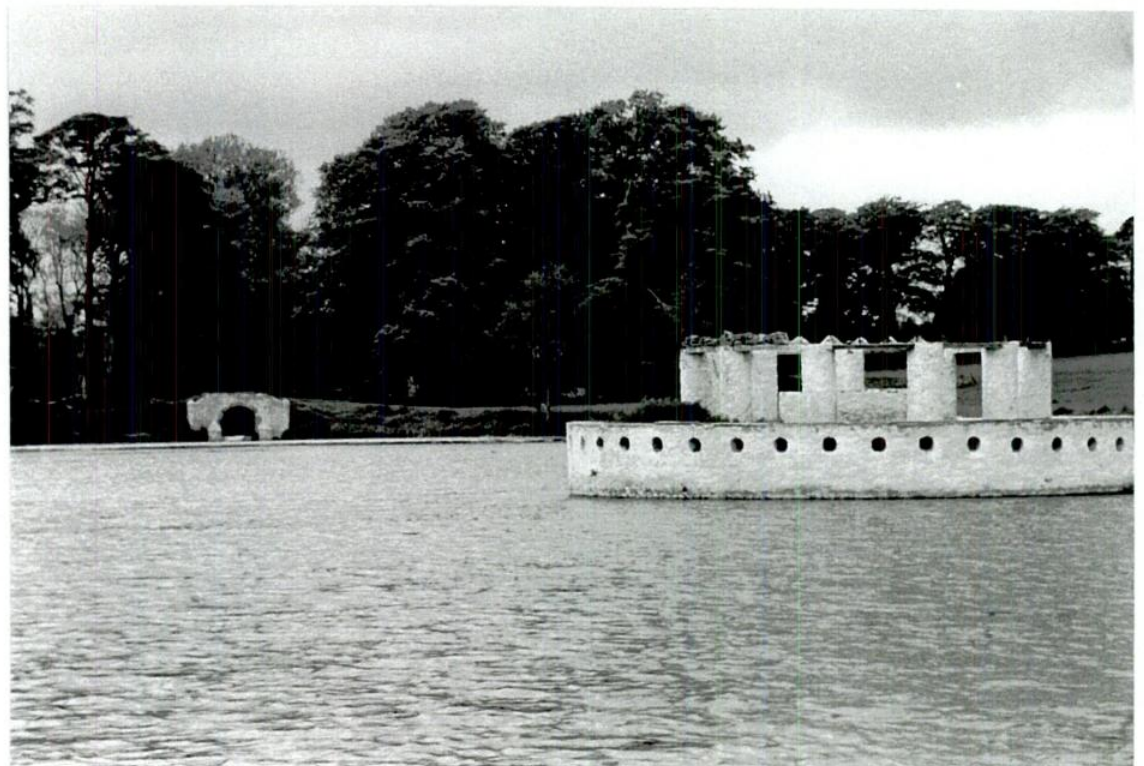


Plate II
Monopteral Temple & Boathouse.
(photograph: Rose Stapleton)

The guide to Larch Hill gardens lists ten follies and other features on the walk. Visitors are encouraged to view the farm in an anti-clockwise direction, along newly laid gravel paths and mown grass. Beginning behind the goat enclosure and continuing down towards the newly excavated eight acre-lake, the walk along an avenue of beech, ash and lime trees was originally designed to include the lake with its follies. A wild flower meadow was planted in 1997 at the southern shore of the lake. The path back to the house, farmyard and walled garden now cuts through the large field at the front of the house, whereas originally the walk continued through the belt of beeches to the east of the lake.

The following is a description of the variety of structures which are disclosed one after another as one proceeds along the walk.

Fox's Earth

The late Mariga Guinness publicised the folly known as Fox's Earth which is built in the large field leading down to the lake, with the imaginative story of Robert Watson, who, after a lifetime of hunting, made provision for his return to Larch Hill as a fox after reincarnation. Watson is reported to have built a series of Gothic Fox-Earths, *"Some he lined with shells, and most are safely built on an artificial island in the middle of an artificial lake"* (Guinness, 1972, p. 23).

The story certainly adds a touch of piquancy to the folly but would appear to be an invention. Patrick Bowe considers the Fox's Earth to be a pigsty or sheep-hut with a walled paddock outside (Bowe, 1998, interview). It would seem likely that the structure was used to accommodate an ornamental or highly prized animal. John Redmill describes the Fox's Earth as

A rectilinear chamber built into an artificial circular mound. The mound is cut back on the side facing the house to reveal an arched entrance, with a pointed central door and flanking windows that light the simple vaulted chamber itself. A rubble stone wall in poor condition continues the circular line of the mound around the cutting, each side being about 10 metres in length, with stout circular gate piers marking the entrance, and on top of the mound is a primitive hexagonal temple in rubble stonework, giving the illusion of columns supporting a shallow stone rubble dome on granite lintels
(Redmill, 1994, p. 40)

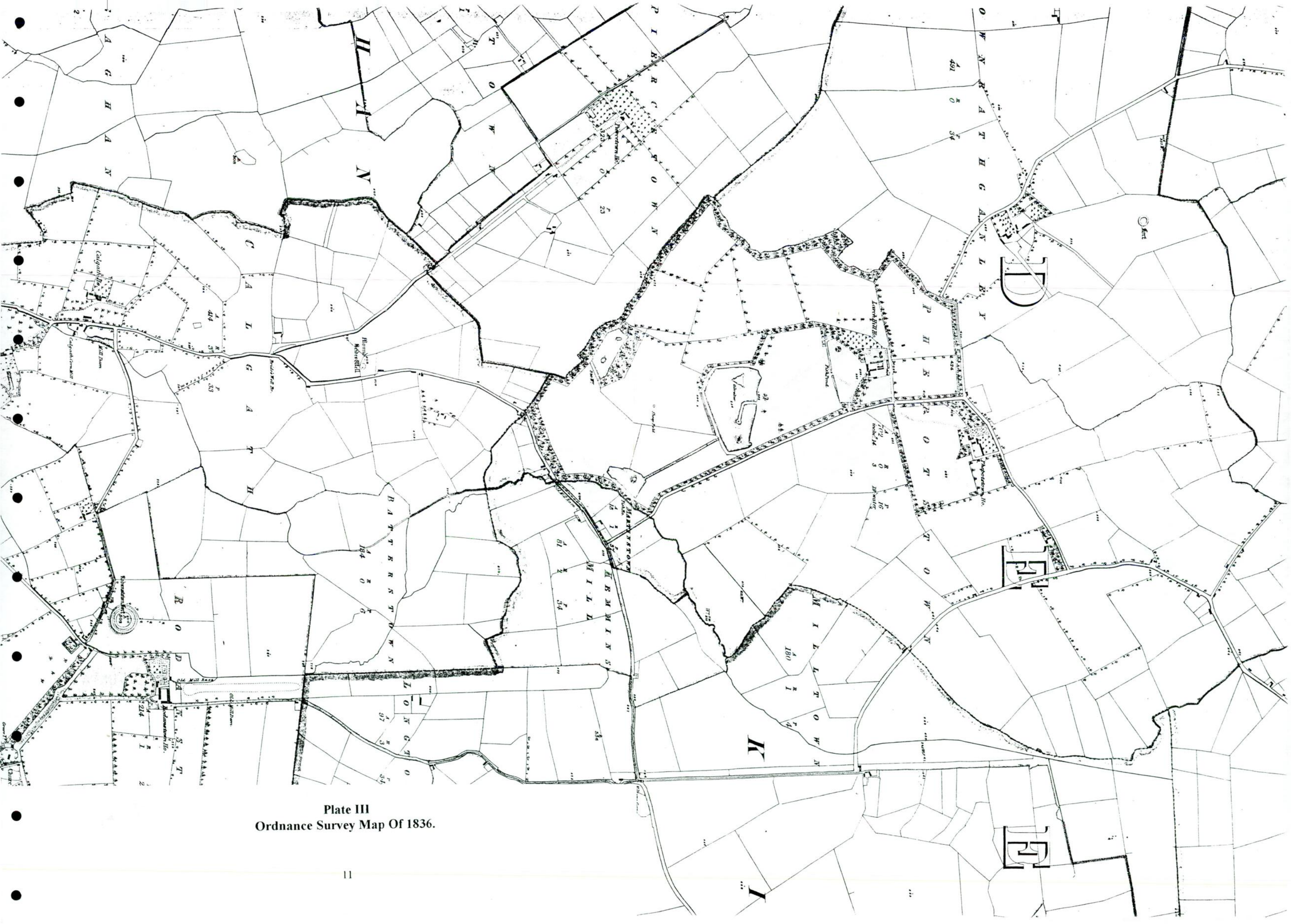


Plate III
Ordnance Survey Map Of 1836.

The Monopteral Temple

This primitive circular structure built on an artificial island in the lake is referred to by James Howley as "*Consisting of eleven stout circular rubble stone piers, which, through a system of flat stone lintels, support a shallow rubble stone entablature*" (Howley, 1993, p. 143). (Plate No. II)

Inside the Temple is a stepped sunken area which, in Patrick Bowe's opinion, is a 'cold bath'. 'Cold baths' became medically fashionable in the eighteenth century and frequently formed part of a circuit walk. They became the focus of a weekly or monthly outing as it was believed that, for health purposes, one should bathe in cold water. For obvious reasons, these dipping pools were built in remote places to facilitate ladies bathing in private. The Temple was connected to the shore up to and including the period when the first ordnance survey was carried out (Plate No. III). It is not known when the linking causeway was removed. Patrick Bowe also believes that the Temple at some period would have acquired a dome though it was quite usual for cold baths to be open to the sky (Bowe, 1998 Interview).

Gibraltar:

On a second artificial island is a battlemented fort, clearly marked on the Ordnance Survey map of 1836 and called 'Gibraltar' (Plate No. III). In the Ordnance Survey Name Book for Meath it is described as:

"A small (nearly) triangular artificial island built by Mr. Watson, having in it five small Towers with loop holes, the whole thing resembling a place of defence"

(O'Donovan cited by O'Flanagan, circa 1927 - 33, p 99)

James Howley is of the opinion that mock battles were played out at Larch Hill (Howley, 1993, p. 104). 'Gibraltar' differs from the other follies in that its only purpose appears to be connected with the pursuit of pleasure and fun (Plate No. IV). The Monopteral Temple, Gazebo-type buildings, Boat-House, Eel House, Shell Tower, Dairy and Gothick stables both furnish the landscape and make concessions to utility.



Plate IV
One of the Towers of Gibraltar.
 (photograph:Rose Stapleton)



Plate V
Lakeside Gazebo.
 (photograph:Rose Stapleton)

Statue of Bacchus

On a smaller artificial island, where the statue of Nimrod, 'mighty hunter' the great-grandson of Noah once stood, a statue of Bacchus has recently been placed. The use of statues for basins, canals and fishponds were fashionable in the eighteenth century and garden writers advocated certain statuary for waterbodies including "Neptune, Palemon, Paniscus and Oceanus" (Langley, 1728, p. 204).

Boathouse

A barrel-vaulted boathouse, dug into the bank of the lake, houses the boat enabling visitors to cross to Gibraltar and the Monopteral Temple (Plate No. II).

Lakeside Gazebo

This primitive gazebo-type building is mid-point on the walk. The structure was possibly a vantage point for spectators during the hunting season. James Howley refers to the three stone seats as possible mounting blocks (Howley, 1993, p. 128). (Plate No. V).

Gazebo with Pigsty

On the high ground, to the east of the farmhouse and close to the gate-lodge entrance, stands an interesting structure consisting of crude masonry columns, built adjacent to a boundary wall and supporting a rough masonry roof. (Howley, 1993, p.[127]). This folly has not been repaired or restored and Michael de las Casas believes the section to the rear of the structure at one time provided shelter for an animal. Some remains of gun-ports and battlements are intact on top of the structure. (de las Casas, 1998, Interview). (Plate No. VI).

The Eel House and Eel Pond

At the north western side of the farm, amid mature beech trees are the relics of the Eel House which remain un-restored at the time of writing but in its ruined state contributes to the bucolic atmosphere of the farm.



Plate VI
Gazebo with Pigsty.
(photograph:Irish Architectural Archive)

Feuille

Close to the lake's western shore and clearly marked on the 1836 Ordnance Survey map is a spiral mound planted tightly with beech trees. John Redmill is of the opinion that as many as thirty beech trees were planted here originally (Redmill, 1994, p. 42). (Plate No. III).

Fairy Tree

Several feet from the shoreline are the remains of a stone structure. A single scots pine grows at this point and it is in the opinion of the de las Casas family, a fairy tree. At the time of writing, nothing is known of this circular stone structure of approximately two metres in diameter. This structure is not marked on the map of 1836 but is discernible on the 1884 map (Plate No. VII).

Gothick Farmyard

The original farmyard is situated adjacent to the rear of Larch Hill farmhouse and in Ann Crookshank's opinion "would have been a very suitable outlook for the ladies" (Crookshank, 1998, p. 138). With its Gothick pointed windows; niches and doorways, the farmyard is home to ornamental fowl, white doves and the goose. (Plate No. VIII). Michael de las Casas rears old breeds of cattle, sheep and pigs and has the largest selection of rare breeds in the Republic of Ireland (de las Casas, 1998, Interview).

Walled Garden with Shell Tower and Dairy

To the west of the house and abutting the farmyard is a walled enclosure of approximately one acre, divided into informal lawn, herbaceous borders and formal beds containing ornamental vegetables and herbs. The statue of Nimrod originally on a small island in the largest lake was moved sometime before 1950. It now stands in a new pond in the walled garden.

In the south west corner of the walled garden is a three-storey circular battlemented structure. The ground floor room is described by James Howley as "*a simple domed room with deep, splayed, gothic windows, which have a delicate glazing pattern containing some coloured glass*" (Howley, 1993 p. 61). (Plate No. IX).

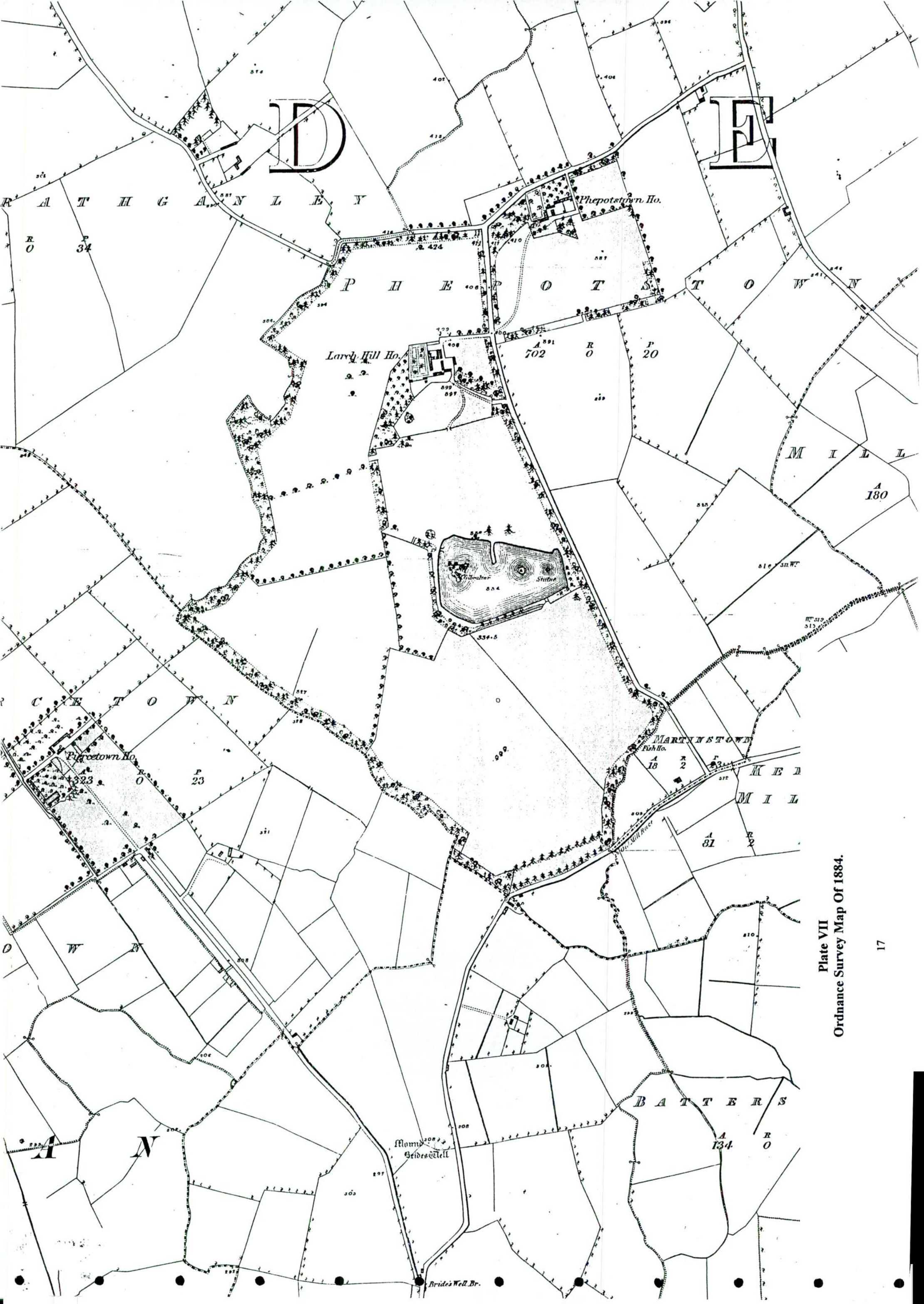


Plate VII
Ordnance Survey Map Of 1884.

The coloured glass adds to the romantic character of the Shell Tower. A small fireplace heated the room on chilly days. The walls are skilfully decorated with limpets, razor fish, mussel, periwinkle and cockleshells in the tradition of the shell-lined grottoes of the eighteenth century. Unfortunately a great number of shells have disappeared. The walls and ceiling in the upper chamber also contain a considerable amount of shell decoration.

From the flat stone roof on the top of the tower it is possible to view the countryside. The visitor is encouraged to take woodland walks to the fishpond, various follies and lakes as advocated by garden writers of the eighteenth century and proponents of the new, more relaxed style of landscape gardening.

The building known as 'the Dairy' is set into the south wall of the garden. The wall contains three small, deep-pointed arched, stained glass windows (Plate No. X). The Dairy is described by Barbara Jones as having "random painted tiles and fine rich windows with purple, gold, clear and emerald glass". (Jones, 1974, p. 426).

Nothing remains of the glazed-tile panels which decorated the internal faces of the walls. The tiles were removed by the Barry family prior to the sale of the farm in 1993. The Irish Architectural Archive is fortunate to have a photographic record of the tiles taken circa 1970. (Plate No. XI. Plate No. XII). A detailed discussion on the loss of these tiles is outside the scope of this thesis. It is unlikely the tiles will ever be returned to their proper place. Throughout the farm are various handcrafted gates with ornate decoration mimicking the castellation and Gothick features of the follies.

There are also follies and features on adjoining land, which is not part of the de las Casas' farm including a sheep-run, a cattle crush and an embellished entrance. These features are also outside the scope of this thesis and are not part of the restoration programme.

A short distance from the original farmyard and house are some newly-built castellated pigsties hen-houses and a ramparted castle for the goats with features echoing the gothick elements of the original farmyard.

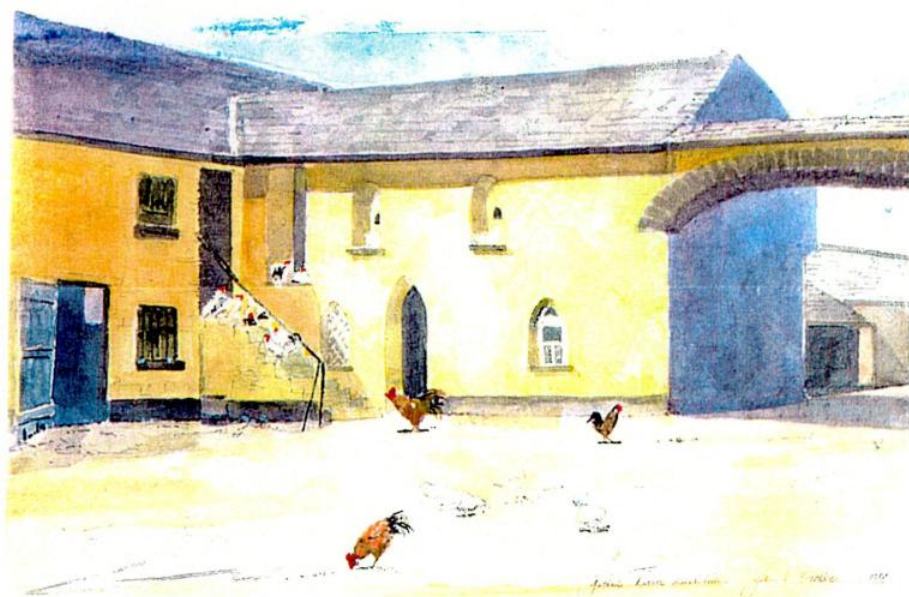


Plate VIII
Illustration of Gothic Farmyard
by
John Christopher Brobbel, R.B.A.



Plate IX
Interior of Shell Tower.
(photograph:Rose Stapleton)



Plate X
One of the stained glass windows in the Dairy.
(photograph:Rose Stapleton)



Plate XI
Glazed Tile Panels.
(photograph:Irish Architectural Archive)



Plate XII
Glazed Tile Panels.
(photograph:Irish Architectural Archive)

CHAPTER 1

Rural Retirement and the *Ferme Ornée*

*Thus was this place,
A happy rural seat of various view;
Groves whose rich Trees wept odorous Gumms and Balme,
Others whose fruit burnisht with Golden Rinde ...
Betwixt them Lawns, or level Downs, and Flocks
Grasing the tender herb, were interpos'd.
(Milton, cited by Turner, 1986, p. 12).*

In summarising the development of Larch Hill from a simple farm to a *ferme ornée*, the main factor, as in all the history of garden design, is the dynamic relationship between man and nature. Trends in landscape gardening in the eighteenth century were such that all nature was considered a garden including cultivated nature in the form of farms. The origins of the French term *ferme ornée* and a description of certain sites it encompasses give the context for Larch Hill. A particular example can be seen through the current restoration of the *ferme ornée* at the Leasowes, near Halesowen, Birmingham, England, of interest as it was the most influential of this early eighteenth century movement. In an interview with Patrick Bowe, it became clear how the term *ferme ornée* applies to Larch Hill.

During the early eighteenth century, landscape gardening in Ireland developed along similar lines to England, though smaller in scale. Irish gardens were essentially formal in design, incorporating straight avenues, topiary work, parterres, straight canals and pleached hedges. This style of garden layout, evolved by the French from the Italian School, had become accepted throughout Europe and “the old-fashioned ‘grand manner’ of garden layout was faithfully chronicled by the French cartographer, John Rocque” (Mallins and The Knight of Glin, 1976, p. xv).

In England, philosophers and politicians sought to bring together the ideal and working landscape. The movement against the conception of the formal garden expressed itself in the writings of the Earl of Shaftesbury and Addison. These powerful thinkers “set the philosophic stage for Pope” (Hunt, 1964, p. 245). Alexander Pope (1687-1744) critic, essayist, poet and gardener translated these ideas into reality in his villa garden at Twickenham. Pope’s garden, laid out between 1719 and 1722 was one of the first

gardens in the new style where he entertained visitors including Irish men Jonathan Swift and the Rev. Patrick Delany. Both Swift and Delany were part of "the select band of savants responsible for the introduction of the new manner" of laying out gardens and worked on their respective gardens near the Deanery of St. Patrick's Cathedral and at Delville, Glasnevin. (Bowe, 1995 p.32).

"Utile qui dulci miscens, ingentia rura, Simplex munditas ornans, punctum nic tulit omne (translated as "He that the beautiful and useful blends, simplicity with greatness, gain all ends" (Switzer cited by Jacques, 1983, p. 19).

The ideal of rural retirement, as described in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, was praised by eighteenth century gardening authors, but it was Stephen Switzer (1632-1745) who was the first professional gardener in England to write about the new style of gardening in his influential book, *The Nobleman, Gentlemen and Gardener's Recreation*, issued in 1715. David Jacques describes how Switzer looked to the pastoral poets of all ages and the passage quoted above, became his motto. Switzer conceived garden design as an art which should imitate nature, where the gardener should *"let his design submit to nature and not nature to his design"* (Hunt, 1964, p. 252). The essence of Switzer's ideas was estate-management combining pleasurable and profitable enjoyment of the countryside. Switzer endeavoured to draw the occupants out of the house, into the open unbounded countryside where they would find *"private walks and Cabinets of Retirement, some select places of recess for Reading and Contemplation"* (cited by Jacques, 1983, p. 19).

Landowners translated the literary ideal into reality at farms throughout England. These early ideas and experiments combining utility with beauty and pleasure arose from being chiefly a literary and philosophical conceit to developing into a more naturalistic form at Enville, Chillington Hall, Woburn, Great Tew and the Leasowes. The theme or idea of the ornamented farm was first described by Switzer in the text of his influential book of 1715 when he wrote of *"mixing the useful and profitable parts of gardening with the Pleasurable"* (*Oxford Companion to Gardens*, 1986, p. 186). However, it was later in 1730 that the term *ferme ornée*, was introduced by Switzer when he referred to *"this taste has for some time been the practice of some of the best genius's of France, under the title of La Ferme Ornée"* (Jacques, 1983, p. 23). *The Oxford Companion to*

Gardens refers to the use of the French term *ferme ornée* in France for the first time in "Watelet's, *Essay Sur Les Jardins* in 1774" and it was later confirmed in 1776 by Duchene who wrote "*aussi venton assez généralement trouver dans les jardins du nouveau heure une ferme ornée*" (*Oxford Companion to Gardens*, 1986, p.186). To add to the confusion over exactly when and by whom the term *ferme ornée* was first used, Joseph Spence cites the countryside by the road from Ferrara to Padua as the influence for the layout at Philips Southcote's Woburn farm. Southcote is widely held to be the first to layout a woodland walk around his farm which was embellished on Switzer's advice. Southcote is also attributed with the discovery of *the belt* (Hussey, 1927, p. 130). *The belt* with a winding walk, led out into the country-side, drawing the occupants out to enjoy the views. Clearly, Stephen Switzer's views as a garden designer and theorist were influential.

And since all agree, that the Pleasure of a country life cann't possibly be contained within the narrow limits of the greatest Garden; woods, fields, and distant inclosures should have the care of the industrious and laborious planter
(Switzer cited in Jacques, 1983, p 19)

So the origin of the term *ferme ornée* remains unclear and the term itself is elusive and difficult to define in that it is the combination of farm and garden, conveying the idealistic vision of farming and country life as a vision of Paradise. The term *ferme ornée* was applied to a working farm, ornamented with trees, shrubs, flowers, along a shady circuit walk, winding through the farm while displaying the surroundings as a variety of scenes, resulting in the combination of the working and the ideal landscape. It is important to state that the *ferme ornée* does not have the monopoly on the idea of the circuit walk.

The important factor here is the idea of having a farm, which combined beauty and production. A *ferme ornée* was usually more modest than the greater parklands with their elaborate follies and buildings. The idea of a walkable circuit around the farm was fashionable during the eighteenth century, where the spectator would be encouraged to stroll out into the countryside, past various ornamental buildings, while animals grazed in the fields. Seats were placed at strategic intervals where the cross-views could be enjoyed. One of the classic differences between the *ferme ornée* and the later parklands is that in the *ferme ornée*, the hedgerow divisions were still kept between fields

containing a variety of animals and crops. In the later Capability Brown parklands, the hedgerows were removed and the land put into pasture with large herds of deer and cattle or sheep.

It is difficult to define the criteria as to what was a *ferme ornée* as no two were the same. Their shared elements were their size: small farms rather than large estates. The owners were dependent upon the farm for a significant amount of their living. A *ferme ornée* was an attempt at enhancing and ornamenting the naturally occurring features in the landscape while also creating some that were entirely man-made. As described by Loudon in 1822, it differs from an ordinary farm in "*having a better dwelling house, neater approach and one partly or entirely distinct from that which leads to the offices*" (Loudon, 1822, p.1181). Paths of gravel were laid alongside wild hedgerows with mixed shrubs and herbaceous plants.

The most celebrated and one of the most frequently visited *ferme ornées* in Britain was the Leasowes at Halesowen, near Hagley, the creation of the poet, painter and gardener, William Shenstone (1714-1763). At the Leasowes, Shenstone put into practice, literary conceptions of what the landscape should look like arising out of his interpretation of the poetry of Thomson and Dyer. This farm and its surrounding countryside is known to all students of garden design. Today, the Leasowes is listed as Grade I by English Heritage on its Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest. Occupying fifty-eight hectares of grassland, wooded hillside and small lakes and streams, the Leasowes is now an internationally famous park, though in the past it had been neglected.

The Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded £1,306,500 towards the restoration of the circuit walk, described by Robert Dodsley, the London Publisher and friend of Shenstone. In his description of the Leasowes, Dodsley maintains that the estate, before Shenstone's improvements was not distinguished for any peculiar beauties. Shenstone's *ferme ornée* occupied a countryside with natural contours, valleys and streams but

it was reserved for a person of his ingenuity both to discover and improve them, which he has done so effectively, that it is now considered as amongst the principal of those delightful scenes which persons of taste in the present age, are desirous to see
(Dodsley, 1801).

Unfortunately, the behest of man and nature working together respecting and working with the natural surroundings cannot be part of the immediate restoration at the Leasowes because the farm is now part of Halesowen Golf Club and the wider views are of industrial buildings and housing estates. Farms and estates which practised Shenstone's vision of integrating farming, beauty and wildlife were an exception to the rule. Shenstone's more holistic view was not a function of the wider countryside which was exploited to provide the physical necessities of life.

It was Shenstone's sensitivity to nature, as his poems suggest, which gave him the impetus to create his landscape garden. Shenstone's small income prevented him from building grand structures. Instead, he ornamented the walk about the farm with viewing points, in the form of seats, with inscriptions in English or Latin, which suggested to the visitor which thoughts or feelings might be appropriate at a particular location. Few estates have been more extensively described by friends and visitors on their travels. Sir John Parnell, a visitor from Ireland in his journal of a tour through England commented on the fact that Shenstone's imagination was allowed to work when he was forced to economise. "*I have often thought that Partly the want of taste we see in several expensive things has been Rather the Result of Plenty of money making much thought unnecessary*" (Parnell, cited by Gallagher 1996, p. 204).

Shenstone's vision and philosophy is revealed in his *Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening*, published after his death in 1763. Shenstone allowed the land with its contours, wooded areas, streams and valleys to lead his work. The continual additions and modifications made to the layout of the garden would seem to indicate a design achieved by experiment. Shenstone refers to "*offensive objects, at proper distance, acquire even a degree of beauty: for instance, stubble or fallow ground*". (Shenstone, cited by Dodsley, 1823, p. 131).

Unconnected Thoughts elaborates on the sensations produced by 'large' and 'plain' urns, clumps of trees, lakes, woods, groves and steeples. Christopher Thacker maintains that Shenstone summed up the incorporation of the developing concept of the sublime into the aesthetics of gardening. For Shenstone, a combination of qualities of both the sublime and the beautiful were necessary in order to generate the variety which completes a landscape (Thacker, 1979, p. 207).

Had Shenstone been a wealthier gentleman, he would not have confined himself to the modest schemes he carried out at the Leasowes. Finally resigned to his lack of means, he considered how a person might occupy and amuse himself.

I find no small delight in rearing all sorts of poultry, geese, turkeys, pullets, ducks etc. I would have you cultivate your garden; plant flowers, have a bird or two in the hall (they will at least amuse your children); write now and then a song; buy now and then a book; write now and then a letter
(Shenstone, cited by Dodsley, 1823, p.140).

Apart from the early experiments of combining beauty with utility at the farms at Enville, Chillington Hall, Great Tew, Woburn and the Leasowes, it is difficult to ascertain how common the practice of ornamenting farms actually was. Loudon refers to the fact that there were “*some fine examples in Surrey, Kent and the Isle of Wight*” (Loudon, 1822, p. 1181). At Llangollen in Wales, Lady Eleanor Butler, having run away from her home at Kilkenny Castle with her friend Sarah Ponsonby in 1778, created a *ferme ornée* of international fame. (Thacker, 1994, p. 146).

The *ferme ornée* or a theme quite similar reached Ireland in the 1740s with Mrs. Delany (1700-88) whose shell grottoes and garden remained a passion all her life. Mrs. Delany, diarist, married Dr. Patrick Delany, friend of Jonathan Swift and moved to the eleven acre property at Delville, Glasnevin, where Dr. Delany had begun to develop the grounds. (Thacker, 1994, p. 202). The property at Delville could be described as having aspects of the *ferme ornée* layout, but was not of sufficient acreage to be considered a working farm. However, Shenstone’s influence was evident at Delville, following visits to the Leasowes and other gardens in England during the 1740’s. Christopher Hussey refers to the garden at Delville as “*decidedly of the ferme ornée description*” and continues by citing the fields “*planted in a wild way with forest trees and with bushes, that look so naturally you would not imagine it as work of art*” (Delany cited by Hussey, 1927, p. 133). Given the way in which both the English and Irish landscape movement developed, it is not surprising that there were examples of the *ferme ornée* in various parts of Ireland. Patrick Bowe described how the idea of the *ferme ornée* was current in the eighteenth century and as a result farms might include aspects of it. A further example of the *ferme ornée* movement could be seen at Sir John Parnell’s farm at Rathleague. E. Charles Nelson refers to a forty acre garden designed

by Joseph Spence (1699-1768) one of the principal proponents of the less formal style of landscape gardening, at Aughnamullen, Co. Monaghan. (Nelson, 1987, p. 13).

The real interest of Larch Hill is its current completeness, in that from the farm buildings, all the way around the circuit walk, the style of the buildings etc., is complete, consistent and integral so it would appear to be the most complete, integrated and intact ferme ornée that I know of.

(Bowe, 1998, Interview).

On visiting the farm at Larch Hill, Patrick Bowe discovered what the de las Casas family had was “*not a parkland or farmland but what could be described as half-way between the two*”. The farmhouse is quite modest and the farm buildings had received much more in the way of architectural treatment. Patrick Bowe confirmed his original opinion, that Larch Hill was a *ferme ornée* and that “*it may well therefore be a vital link in the chain of the history of Irish landscape gardening*” (Bowe, 1998, Interview).

CHAPTER 2

The creation and development of the *ferme ornée* at Larch Hill

There are in this county twelve noblemen's seats, besides many commodious and elegant mansion houses, belonging to the resident gentlemen of large property, some farming the whole, some a considerable part, and some only a very small proportion of their properties
(Thompson, 1802, p. 62).

Two hundred years ago, travellers in the Parish of Kilmore, Barony of Upper Deece and County of Meath would have enjoyed views of country seats and estates with acres of beautifully embellished grounds, ornamental plantations and nurseries. Had the journey taken them past Larch Hill, they would have caught a glimpse, through the eastern avenue of beeches, of the largest of the three lakes, with its two artificial islands, 'Gibraltar' and the 'Monopteral Temple' and the tiny island on which Nimrod stood. Larch Hill, with its lakes, woodland, grottoes, fishponds, Gothick farmyard and Walled garden would certainly have been the object of many 'Sunday starers'! The gardens would have been visited and commented on by close friends and relations. It is unfortunate that no record, journal or diary has been found. No paintings, drawings or prints of the farm and gardens are available to illuminate how fashions in landscape gardening were as influential here at Larch Hill as they were at the great estates at Carton, Castletown and Dangan.

Though the enclosed agricultural landscape of Larch Hill has changed considerably over the past two centuries, the surroundings, wider views and prospects have remained almost unchanged. No survey of field archaeology has been made. It is therefore not possible at this present time to ascertain whether the land during the eighteenth century was arable, ploughed in ridge and furrow or a combination of pasture and arable. In the course of a telephone conversation with Daniel Kelly at the Botany Department, Trinity College on August 6th 1998, he expressed the view that were a field survey undertaken, it would most likely be inconclusive as had been the case in the Iveagh Gardens restoration field work. It would appear at this point, that any effort to trace earlier cultivation through field archaeology at Larch Hill would generate unsatisfactory results. Wheat was the principal crop grown in the country during the early nineteenth

century (Tithe applotment books). It is highly likely there were corn fields planted at Larch Hill, benefiting both game birds and the onlooker.

The development of Larch Hill from a simple farm to what became known in genteel circles as a *ferme ornée* is poorly documented, so it is useful to give an account of the changes, which have occurred to the present day. The *ferme ornée* at Larch Hill has been in a continual process of development and decline for almost three hundred years as part of the larger Phepotstown Estate. The original farmhouse, known as Phepotstown House, still stands, a short distance from the farmhouse at Larch Hill. Michael de las Casas has expressed the view that either the Prentice family or Richard and Mary Daly are the most likely people to have made the initial improvements on the land, integrating farming with nature, beauty and artifice on the gently undulating land. It is not possible to ascertain if there was any plan or clear idea how the farm might be laid out.

The first mention of improvements was in 1726 when Patrick Mullaghy notes the farm was mortgaged, 'with all houses, buildings and improvements made thereon by Robert Prentice', (Mullaghy undated). The sum of £400.00 is mentioned at this point, a considerable amount at that time, and would appear to indicate that Robert Prentice was investing in the infrastructure, gateways, sheds and buildings. Patrick Mullaghy continues by assuming that the walls, gateways and sheds were built by the same person who built the walled garden, eel-house, fish hatchery and follies, given the similarity in materials and style. Anne Crookshank expressed the view that as no exact dating for the work exists, it is likely that it was "completed over many decades and by many different owners" (Crookshank, 1998, p. 130).

If Mrs. Delany introduced landscape gardening to Ireland as Christopher Hussey suggests, it is possibly the missing link in the history of the *ferme ornée* at Larch Hill. Patrick Mullaghy notes that John and Robert Prentice were first generation farmers, sons of a clothier in the Coombe, Dublin. During the early eighteenth century, Jonathon Swift was creating his garden on land at the Liberties of St. Patrick's, "where he spent £400 on enclosing Naboth's Vineyard with a high wall because his fruit was being stolen and his horses worried" (Malins & the Knight of Glin, 1976. p.33). Dr. Patrick

Delany was also busy improving his small estate at Delville during the same period. After his marriage to Mrs. Delany the garden was a source of pleasure and delight for both of them.

An accomplished needle-worker, Mrs. Delany would have insisted upon using only the finest threads and linen for her needlework. Ruth Hayden writes that Mrs. Delany shopped in Dublin *"for those of her friends in the Deanery of Down unable to get to good shops"* (Haydon, 1980. p. 91). It is possible she may have purchased her requirements at the Coombe shop of the Prentice family. The Prentice family, as merchants, were not part of Mrs. Delany's sophisticated social circle but news of the new trend in landscape gardening would have spread.

Garden enthusiast, Jane Powers expresses a view that *"eager to demonstrate their cosmopolitan taste, the family – newly rich haberdashers from the Coombe – went about improving the landscape at Phepotstown"* (Powers, Irish Times, 27th June 1998, p. 14). The surrounding neighbourhood is recorded in letters, journals and diaries by Swift, Mrs. Delany and Anne Towneleya Dawson, all of whom were garden enthusiasts. Mrs. Delany visited her godson at nearby Dangan in the 1730's and returned again in 1748. Anne Crookshank refers to a letter from Mrs. Delany to her sister dated 15th August 1748, describing how the Wellesley family amused themselves. Mrs. Delany enthuses that

"In the Dangan lake there are several ships, one complete man-of-war. My godson [a child, later the first Earl of Mornington] is governor of the fort, and Lord High Admiral; he has hoisted all his colours for my reception, and was not a little mortified that I declined the compliment of being saluted from the fort and ships"
(Crookshank, 1998, p. 137).

Issac Butler, records a visit to Dangan circa 1744, again describing the scene as *'a noble gravel walk, which leads down to the lough in the distance'* (Butler, M.S. 1744). The entry continues with an account of salutes and gunfire. This behaviour is a complete departure from the esoteric Shenstonian philosophy on which the landscape at Larch Hill was originally based.

The estate at Dangan was geographically close to Larch Hill but apart from a casual association it would not appear to be integral to the whole concept. The Duke of

Wellington is a name which resonates in people's minds and adds a certain piquancy to the story. Anne Crookshank maintains that the forts at Larch Hill may have been based on similar islands at Dangan. However, I wish to make it clear that as there is confusion over exactly when and by whom Gibraltar and the Monopteral Temple were built, one can only record current opinion. It is impossible therefore, to arrive at any conclusions as to the aspirations and dreams of the individuals who lived on the land. However, when Samuel Watson came to Larch Hill in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, the estate was well endowed with both wood and water, farm buildings, outhouses, walled garden, eel-house, and fish ponds.

The most detailed and informative account of the completed garden is by John O'Donovan in his contribution to the Ordnance Survey Name Books. The text was largely concerned with compiling information relative to the antiquities of the counties of Ireland during the progress of the Ordnance Survey, 1834-41. Listing eleven different spellings for Phepotstown, he concludes by calling on the Down Survey "*to decide this very uncertain name*" (O'Donovan cited by O'Flanagan, 1927-33 p. 88). Maps dating from the early nineteenth century suggest that the estate had reached maturity. Phepotstown is recorded as containing

'702a.16.p of which 37a. 2r.op are planted chiefly with fir trees and 14a. 3r. 19p. of water of three lakes. The property of Mr. Scott, Mr. Barclay his agent it is let in three farms viz. Watson, Mr. Walsh and Mr. Boylan all in perpetuity at £1.05 per acre'
(O'Donovan, cited by O'Flanagan, circa 1927-33, p. 88).

The entry for Larch Hill includes a description of the house and surrounding landscape,

a good house two stories and slated the seat of Mr. Watson, the ground about it is neatly planted the garden tho small is considered to be one of the handsomest in the country
(O'Donovan, cited by O'Flanagan, circa 1927-33, p. 98).

There is confusion in the early sources as to whether or not Samuel Watson built the fort, 'Gibraltar'. Patrick Mullaghy notes Samuel Watson's arrival at Larch Hill circa 1790. This would signify that the fort was not built until after 1790 and that the landscape gardens were in two phases; the early *ferme ornée* with its three lakes, fish ponds, eel-house, walled garden, shell tower, dairy and Gothick stables and the later additions of the toy fort and Monopteral temple in the larger lake.

An important entry describing the island fort is recorded as; “A *small (nearly triangular) artificial island built by Mr. Watson, having in it five small towers with loop holes, the whole resembling a place of defence*” (O’Donovan, cited by O’Flanagan, circa 1927-33, p. 99).

This would indicate that Gibraltar was a later development on the landscape and not one of the original features on the landscape when the *ferme ornée* was first conceived.

The new gardening and landscape movement of the eighteenth century placed particular emphasis on the planting of woodland and its situation was considered of great importance when it comes to laying out a landscape garden.

Where a free Prospect does itself extend into a Garden; whence the Sun may lend His Infl’ence from the East; his radiant heat should on your house through various windows beat: But on that side which chiefly open lies To the North Wind, whence Storms and Show’rs arise, There plant a Wood;
(Rapin cited by Langley, 1728, p. 192).

Though the quantity of natural wood within Co. Meath was naturally small, plantations around gentlemen’s seats were extensive. Robert Thompson in his survey displaying the state of agriculture in Co. Meath, writes that *There are few gentlemen in this country, who have any taste for improvement, that have not a nursery, in which they rear trees for their own planting;*” (Thompson, 1802, p. 241).

It was normal practice to buy young seedlings from one of the public nurseries at either Duleek barony, Trim, Summerhill and the most extensive of all at Ballybeg, near Kells. Robert Thompson describes Mr. O’Reilly’s nursery at Ballybeg as the largest in Ireland and indeed believes, “*There are few more extensive nurseries even in England, and he is extending and improving it every year*” (Thompson, 1802, p. 239).

The greatest possible variety of trees were grown at O’Reilly’s in poor cold clay, out in the open air. These young trees were frequently transplanted before delivery, encouraging good lateral roots, which, in turn, were capable of drawing more nourishment from the earth. Unlike the trees grown in closets in the vicinity of Dublin which according to Robert Thompson are “*Like children too tenderly reared, subject to take cold, when transplanted to a more bleak situation, than they have been accustomed to bear*” (Thompson, 1802, p. 241).

Within the parish of Kilmore, 16 acres of land was laid out in ornamental plantation and two nurseries. The two principal seats were at Larch Hill and Phepotstown. In detailing the development of Larch Hill as a *ferme ornée* to the present day, the Ordnance Survey map of Co. Meath, 1836 and the Estate Map of 1838, now hanging in the hallway of the farm prove invaluable. In the Ordnance Survey map of 1836 (Plate No. III), the plantation of beech, ash and lime trees runs from the front of the house, past the Fox's Earth, the Eel House, the feuille and ends at approximately where the lakeside gazebo now stands. This gazebo is not marked on the map of 1836. A canal begins at this point and continues in the direction of another canal, which runs south to a smaller lake with one island. A third lake is set in a heavily wooded area to the south and contains two islands. An old millrace is just south of the Fish House. The Estate Map of 1838 (Plate No. I) drawn up by a Mr. J. O'Connor would appear to be a proposal for major change in the layout as it depicts the beech walk continued on in place of the canal and joining up with a belt to the east of the farm. The two smaller lakes have been filled in. Changes are made within the remaining lake with the removal of the smaller peninsula to the Monopteral Temple. The plan of the walled garden suggests a large oval layout where it was originally laid out in several geometric parterres.

This Estate map and its proposals mark the beginning of a gradual decline certainly at the southern end of the farm. By 1884, the Ordnance Survey map records vast amounts of woodland felled (Plate No. VII). There is a narrow area of new plantation shown immediately south of the lake. The beautifully wooded layout of the eighteenth century *ferme ornée* was slowly being eroded. The two smaller lakes had by that time been filled in and the land returned to pasture or arable use. By the time the 1909 Survey was completed, the new trees plantation which had been planted before 1884 at the southern end of the lake had been felled and a canal or ditch again replaced the plantation (Plate No. XIII).

James Howley refers to the Monopteral Temple as the original house of the statue of Nimrod. (Howley, 1993, p.143). A statue is shown on the Ordnance Survey map of 1836. Some time after the 1909 survey and before 1950 when the lake was part drained and filled in, the statue, was moved to the walled garden. There is some confusion as to where Nimrod was placed in the lake originally but it would appear from the Ordnance survey maps that it was housed on a small isolated island east of the Monopteral temple.

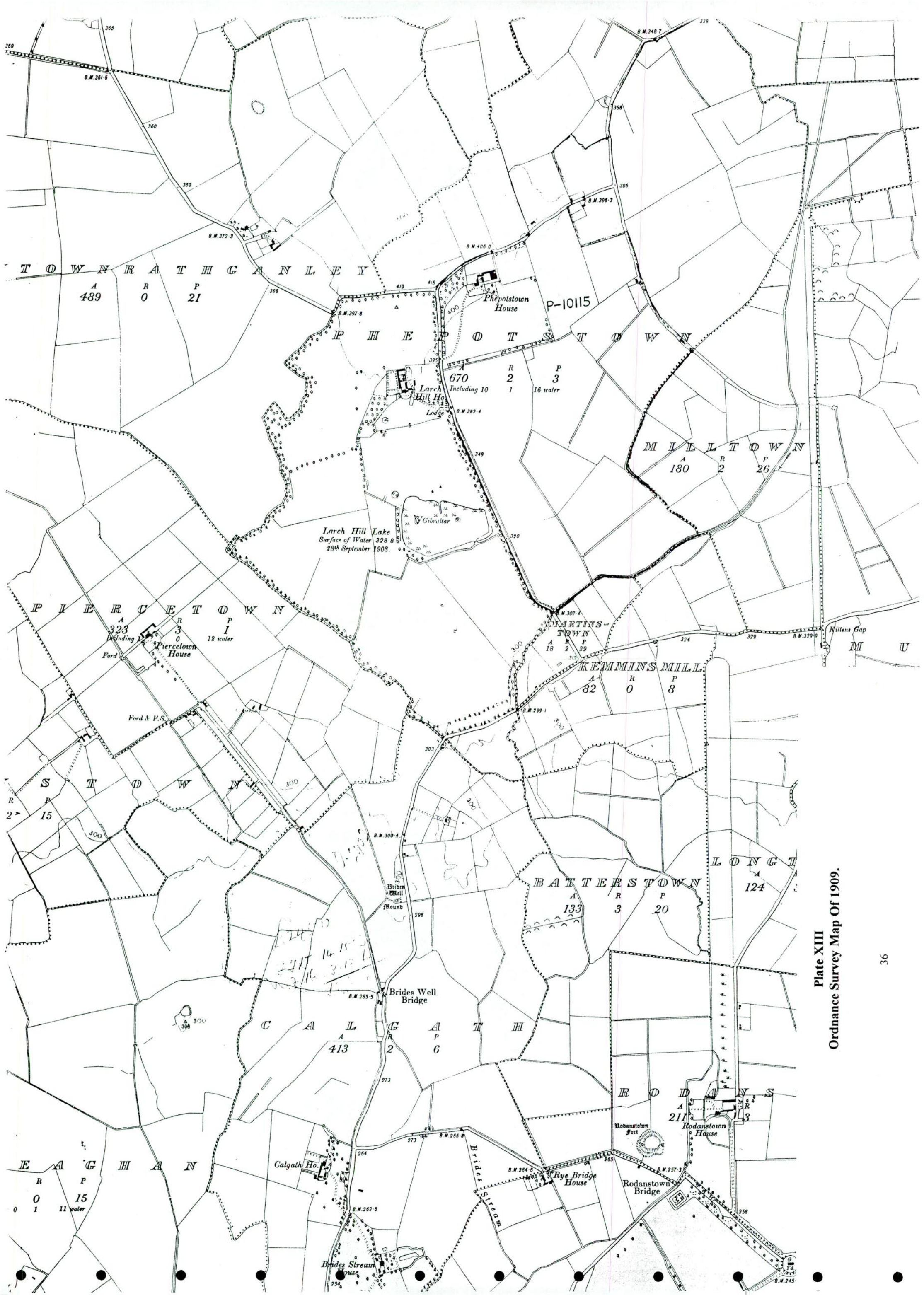


Plate XIII
Ordnance Survey Map Of 1909.

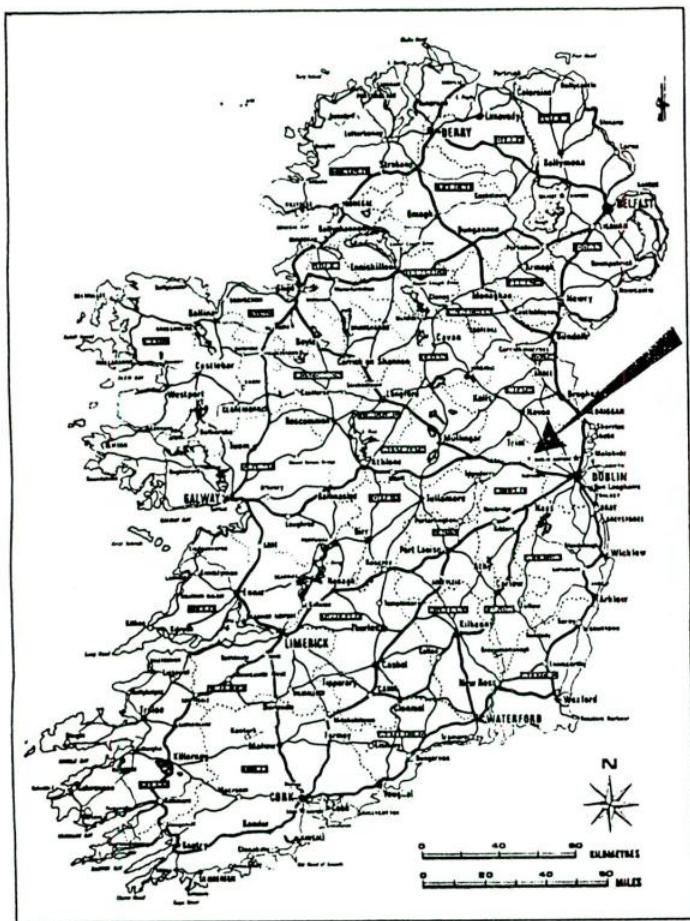
This third small island was not linked to the shore by a causeway. The Monopteral temple was linked to the shore up to and including the 1836 survey but by 1884 the causeway linking the Monopteral temple to the shore had been removed. As discussed earlier in the introduction, the Monopteral temple was, in Patrick Bowe's opinion, a cold bath or dipping pool.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the farm had changed ownership and the garden and follies were in a state of neglect, abandoned on land once more used only for production. In a census of Meath taken in 1901, Larch Hill House is described as a first class residence with thirteen out-offices and farm steadings. This census only included out-offices intended for domestic or agricultural purposes and conservatories, greenhouses or summer-houses and tea-rooms were not listed (Census, Meath, 1901, no. 12/21, National Archives). Christopher Barry, head of the household at Larch Hill at the time, entered the required details for his wife, children and servants, all Catholics, who could both read and write. This entry was in contrast with entries for neighbouring households, where in some cases, neither servants nor occupants could write or read.

The 1909 Survey Map shows the lake had become a marshy area (Plate No. XIII). The walled garden was used as a paddock. Barbara Jones writes that even when follies are lost and abandoned in Ireland, they are "*better preserved than they would be in England for follies are kindly regarded here, and few heave a brick at them*" (Jones 1974, p. 426).

The apathetic outlook with which we are endowed as a nation is to our advantage in situations such as this.

By the 1950s the Ordnance Survey map shows the Larch Hill lake reduced to half its former size, almost as if a line were drawn from the small jetty to the opposite bank. The area on which the Monopteral Temple is built was no longer an island. Gibraltar remained alone in the marshy section of the lake (Plate No. XIV). It is fortunate that the follies, now overgrown, were allowed to remain in this condition as so many features have been bulldozed in the past on other estates and farms.



LARCH HILL

KILCOCK, CO. KILDARE, IRELAND

With about
288 acres S.M. (116.5 ha)

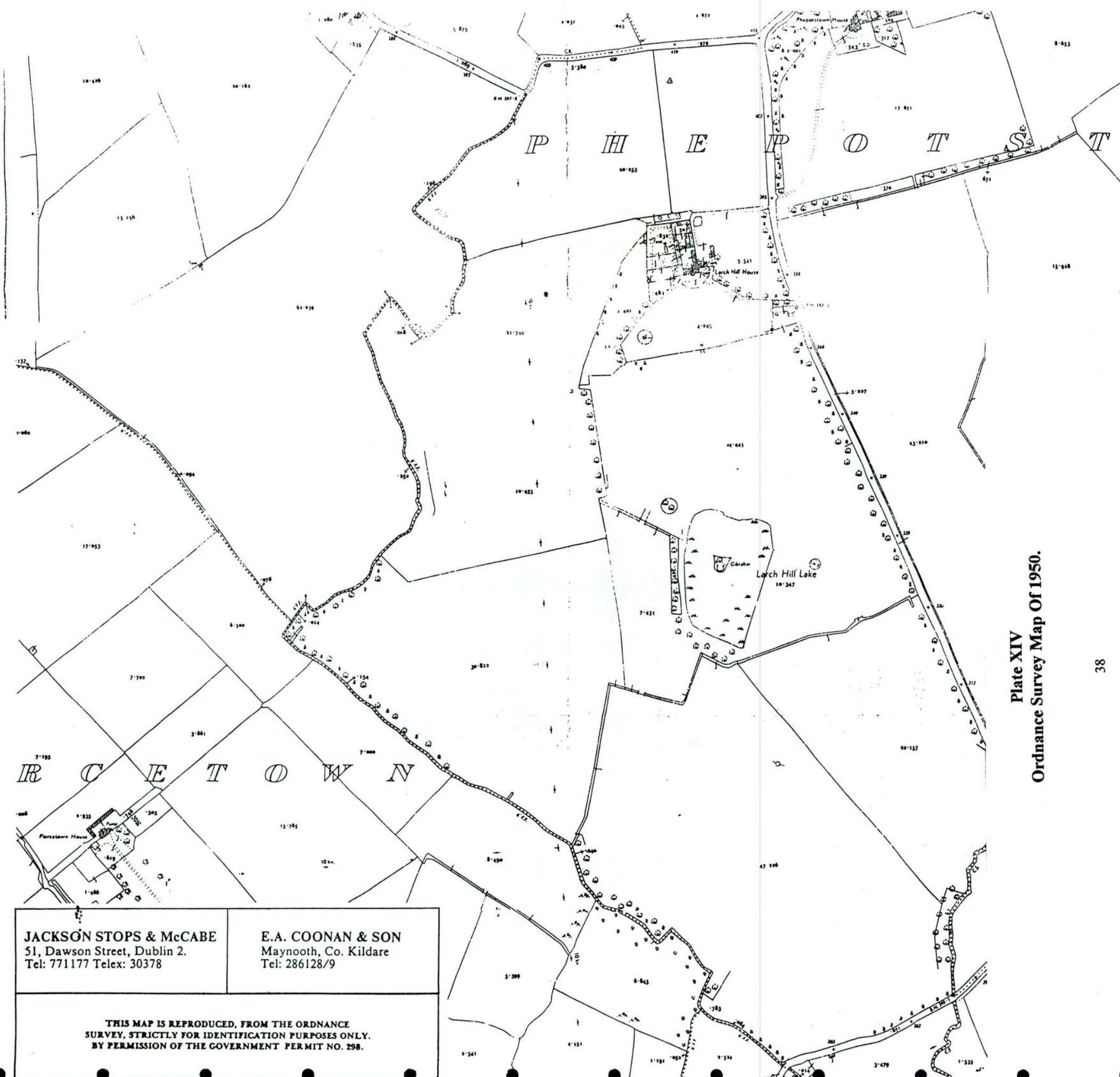


Plate XIV
Ordnance Survey Map Of 1950.

JACKSON STOPS & McCABE
51, Dawson Street, Dublin 2.
Tel: 771177 Telex: 30378

E.A. COONAN & SON
Maynooth, Co. Kildare
Tel: 286128/9

THIS MAP IS REPRODUCED, FROM THE ORDNANCE
SURVEY, STRICTLY FOR IDENTIFICATION PURPOSES ONLY.
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Photographs in the Irish Architectural Archive dating from circa 1970 include a view of a small section of the lake (Plate No. VI). By 1988, the most recent Ordnance Survey, the lake had been completely filled in. The Barry's had received a grant in the 1970s to drain the lake. Michael de las Casas, wonders if the land thereby reclaimed for agricultural purposes was worth the trouble or the loss of historical continuity. When Michael and Louisa de las Casas came to Larch Hill in 1993 they began the task of repairing and conserving the landscape with its follies and features.

CHAPTER 3

The Restoration and its Objectives

*When with a lover's eye I cease to gaze
on Nature's Charms, though rob'd in simple stole,
For Pomp, for honour's meretricious blaze,
May Joy desert the Seasons as they roll,
And Pleasure ever be a stranger to
my soul.
(Carey, cited by Loudon, 1802, p. 426).*

Nothing can quite prepare the visitor for the experience of Larch Hill. Within this space there is an orchestration of visual experiences as one moves from light to shade along paths which cut through woodland, meadow, dell, walled garden, farmyard and pasture. Working closely with Ruairi Canavan, Michael de Las Casas is responsible for landscape design, arboriculture, and horticulture services, ground's maintenance and the restoration programme at Larch Hill. Together with Finola Reid, they have revised planting compositions and layout and the grounds have once again become "*one of the handsomest in the country*" (O'Donovan, cited by O'Flanagan, circa 1927-33, p. 98).

Restoration of historic gardens has recently become an important sphere of activity for landscape architects. Projects such as the restoration of the garden and follies at Larch Hill qualify for funding as the *ferme ornée* is of international significance and has the potential to sustain tourism. The *ferme ornée* is itself of special historical value as it is an example of a poorly represented style. The Great Gardens of Ireland Restoration Programme, grant-aided by the European Regional Development Fund has awarded funding towards the restoration of the walled garden, the circuit walk, the lake and the repair of the follies and the conversion of the barn to tea-rooms. The purpose of the report commissioned by Michael de las Casas and prepared by John Redmill was to assess the importance and condition of the landscape buildings and recommend what repairs should be carried out to ensure their future (Redmill, 1994). The report incorporates a list of ten follies situated on the circuit walk and the degree of their disrepair. The main tasks to be undertaken included the creation of paths, the removal of bushes and hedges, the clearing of watercourses, the planting of trees and hedgerows, replanting of the walled garden, the excavation and restoration of the lake and the repair of the follies.

The Lake Restoration with its two follies

*Of pleasant Floods, and Streams, my Muse now sings,
Of chrystal Lakes, Grotts and transparent Springs;
By there a Garden is more charming made,
They chiefly beautify the rural Shade.
You who employ your Time to cultivate
Your Gardens, and to make their Glory great;
Among your Groves and Flow'rs, let Water flow;
Water, the Soul of Groves and Flow'rs too".
(Langley, 1728, p. 198).*

Prior to the restoration all that remained of the lake was "*marshy remnants and a thick tangle of undergrowth and trees*" (Howley, 1993, pg. 104). What remained of Gibraltar and the Monopteral Temple was engulfed in ivy, bramble, hawthorn and hazel. James Howley described the scene where "*a giant yew tree rose from the centre of the island, creating an even stronger atmosphere of abandonment*" (Howley, 1993, p. 104).

The restoration of the lake, costing £30,000 took four months and was finally completed in the spring of 1997. Some of the bed of the lake had been dug out previously forming a moat around 'Gibraltar'.

*"The trees were felled, then the fallen trunks cut up into manageable lengths. The sizeable logs were thrown to one side, the branches and brambles to another. The ivy vines were stripped from the towers, leaving pale dendritic patterns on the ancient plaster. The roofs of the towers, built using slabs of shale about two inches thick held up by metal spars – now rusting away in brittle flakes to reveal the metal's layered molecular structure – were covered on top by a matter scraw of soil and vegetation. This had built up over the years as the eddying wind carried dust from the fields and the edge of the lake and trapped it in the circular roof space, the black dust of centuries migrating slowly across the planet. Seeds from the wind or from bird droppings had taken root so that now the towers were capped with a variety of weeds ivy, blackberry briars, wild rose and various small wild flowers, which were in bloom".
(Mullaghy, undated, possibly 1996/1997, p. 9).*

The yew tree still stands. It was thought its removal would have incurred bad luck. Michael de las Casas voiced concern over the decreasing water levels in the lake in August, 1998. A fault was repaired and at the time of writing, normal levels would appear to have been restored (Plate No. XV). The lake is three to four feet deep, dropping to eight feet at the south eastern end, and home to swans, wild ducks, coots

and wildlife. It is anticipated that the boat in the barrel-vaulted boat-house will be in use for visits to 'Gibraltar' and the Monopteral Temple.

'Landscape Husbandry' is a term coined by Charles Loudon in the nineteenth century, encompassing all kinds of estate design and management, arable and pasture farming, planting, gardening and improvements. It is a term, which describes what the de las Casas family, are endeavouring to continue to maintain.

In landscape gardens similar to Larch Hill, the walk, as in the *ferme ornée* of Philip Southcote at Woburn and William Shenstone at the Leasowes, became the central theme. The walk links together different naturalised scenes of streams, stops or cascades, lake, dell, meadow and is embellished with grottoes and rustic structures. Paths are cut through the area south-west of the farm buildings. Because of the nature of the beech walk, there are no obvious rides cut through woodland so the walk is laid out, encouraging the visitor on foot in an anti-clockwise direction. Ruairi Canavan has explained how the area just south of the goat enclosure has been laid with sod taken from the walled garden. The removal of anachronistic trees is planned and the areas will be planted with hardwoods and an orchard with a spring meadow of primroses, cowslips and bulbs. There are some larch growing here which will be untouched. There are some further larch about the farm but as to whether an outer containment of larch was part of the original belt, it is not possible to say. The walk continues past the 'stops', a stone ditch which Michael de las Casas refers to as 'cascades'. The water draining from the land, fills the stone rectangular pits which could be described as tiered. The water, when in full flow is dispersed slowly, an ideal habitat for "*trout in the clear rill, pike in the dark deep pool and the eel in the muddy bottom*" (Loudon, 1806, p. 423). The Eel House grotto within the pond, where eels were harvested for the household, is un-restored at the present time. This is an area where major tree surgery is required.

Larch Hill lacks the succession of tree planting necessary to sustain continual and on-going regeneration and the majority of trees are close to the end of their life. There are plans to re-establish the beech walk, planting young beech on mounds, which will prolong the life of the trees. It is also Michael de las Casas and Ruairi Canavan's intention to embellish the walk, using alongside the beech, *Taxodium Swamp Cypress*,

Lebanon Cedar and some exotics. It is also planned to break up the outline with small groups of walnut or similar estate trees.

Any recent planting has been of the indigenous variety, native willow, with willow coppice on wet areas to maximise usage of conditions and some dogwood (Canavan, 1998, Interview). The hedgerows are embellished with dogrose, and honeysuckle as recommended by Finola Reid. Sweet-briar, native spindle, wayfaring trees, such as *Euonymus Europaea* are examples of native planting which are rarely seen anymore and which add colour to the walk. Borders are planted up with crab-apple and hazel, all of which have ancillary benefits for wildlife in keeping with the philosophy of the owners. Throughout the *ferme ornée* the hedges are layed, rather than flayed to allow vistas inwards. As a result of hedge laying, an incredibly dense hedge is formed, totally stock-proof with very important wild-life value. (Canavan, 1998, Interview). By contrast, the contemporary process of flaying encourages the hedge to become top-heavy with no growth at the bottom for ground-nesting birds. This holistic vision at Larch Hill provides benefits for wildlife and game. Loudon described the importance of providing a suitable environment for wildlife including singing birds and game, which he believed should be encouraged about a residence,

By planting such trees, shrubs or plants as they are peculiarly fond of; as the mountain ash, barberry for the thrush; islex for the linnet, the plantago or polygonum for the finch; the chervil, parsley as well as low bushes for the pheasant and partridge; and the typha, iris or phalaris for the coot, wild duck, swan or goose.
(Loudon, 1806, p. 423).

The meadow at the south end of the lake is native and has an intrinsic wildlife value and is managed in that way but it is important to maintain a balance in everything and it is not a nature reserve.

As one leaves the lake and turns back towards the house, farmyard and walled garden, the path cuts through the field. The original walk continued through the east beech plantation as far as the gate lodge. As Michael de las Casas has plans to build a new structure beside the lodge, this temporary new path through the field will possibly continue to be used for visitors. Patrick Bowe has expressed anxiety over the introduction of new structures to a complete and integral scheme. However, as the farm is the de las Casas' home and business it is to be expected that changes will take place

as have done over the past 300 years of the farm's existence. The important issue is that any future work or building is carried out in a sensitive manner.

The Walled Garden, Dairy and Shell Tower

"O blest Abode; O dear delicious shade: Had I for you, or you for me been made, How gladly would I fix my wandering course with you?"
(Langley, 1728, p. 203).

In order to pass from one area of shade to another, continuity of areas of 'perfect shade' were laid out as recommended by garden writers such as Batty Langley in the early eighteenth century. The dairy and shell tower set into the south wall in the walled garden are ideal places of shade, where one could sit and occupy oneself with a book or needlework.

Dairy

Repairs have been carried out to the three small gothic windows of painted glass ovals and diamonds in lead frames. The walls have been re-plastered with lime rendering but the glazed tile panels, which were removed by the previous owners, cannot be part of the restoration programme. The tiles are an important part of the fabric of this historic layout and the garden buildings and follies form one of the most important layouts in Ireland. The dairy with its tile panels were photographed circa 1977 and the Irish Architectural Archive have copies on file (Plate Nos. XI and XII).

Shell Tower

At the time of writing, the Shell Tower remains un-restored, apart from the replacement of all but one of the original decorative windows (de las Casas, 1998, Interview). Restoration of missing and broken shells is unfortunately an impossible task. The important issue here concerns the preservation and protection of the remaining shell decoration.

Walled Garden

The walled garden, close to the house and farmyard is a protected space and is quite separate from the wild arcadia. Before the restoration the area was used for grazing

sheep. Two large lime trees grew near the dairy and shell tower. Box hedging now defines beds of culinary, medicinal and cosmetic herbs inter-planted with vegetables, in every sense, a contemporary 'potager'. In the abundant herbaceous border there is an element of echoing back to the gardens of the recent past in that the 'Jekyll' type of planting is more late nineteenth century/early twentieth century. The design concept for the walled garden does not take as its basis a formal layout for the garden as recorded on the 1836, Ordnance Survey map of the area. Ruairi Canavan considers the restoration work to be more contemporary in its layout and planting and in the course of the interview made it clear that the restoration objective was not to keep rigidly to the nineteenth century layout, with straightforward parterres. (Canavan, 1998, Interview). The plan of 1838 in the hallway of the house at Larch Hill shows the layout in the walled garden as an oval layout. This estate map was possibly a scheme, which was never carried out.

The combined herbaceous border and 'potager' type of layout is concerned more with floral prolificacy than historical exactitude. There are all kinds of interests represented here. Finola Reid, Programme Manager, is employed by the Tourist Board and her brief is to make the gardens attractive to visitors and tourists. The walled garden is freed from dirt and decay and is, in a sense, a new garden.

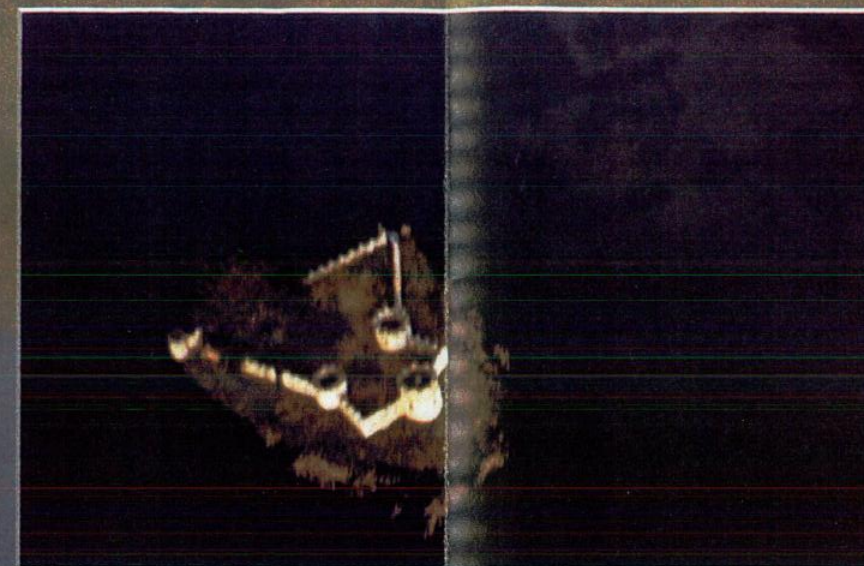
The newly planted borders were damaged by the late frosts in April of 1998 and rare and unusual plants were lost. The east facing border runs from hot to cool colours while the south facing border is planted with silvers and gold, unusual for a sunny aspect. The fig tree is well established on the original south facing fruit wall with its fireplace and air-ducts, which generated heat and prevented frost damage to early blossoms. It is Ruairi Canavan's intention to find unusual plants, "not rare necessarily, but bizarre, and in keeping with the fascination for the bizarre, such as *Poncirus Trifoliata*, with orange fruit and a thorny modified stem" (Canavan, 1998, Interview). Unusual too are the *Giant Himalayan lilies* with flowers of six to eight inches long. The informal herbaceous planting, almost wild in its abundance, contrasts with the meticulous lines in the herb garden edged with box.

Take of Solomon Seal, Comfrey Leaves and Roots, Marshmallows, Hyssop, Pot Thyme, Mother Thyme, Succory, Agrimony, Plantane Leaves and Roots, Clivers, Nettle Tops, Scabious both Kinds, Dandelion, Rosemary, Violets (or their Leaves if the Flowers are

gone) scarlet Strawberry Leaves, Ground-Ivy, Borage Leaves, Balm, Mint, Pimpernel, and of Colts Foot, each one Handful. Of Couch-grass roots, and five leafed grass, each one Handful and half, with a small Quantity of Rue, and one Head of Garlick. Of Figs one pound sliced, of Raisins in the Sun, one pound stoned and one quarter of a pound of Liquorise sliced.
(Langley, 1728, p. 190).

Batty Langley concludes his chapter on the distilling herbs “*necessary for the service of all gentlemen*”, with the receipt for shortness of breath. Most, if not all of the ingredients are grown throughout the garden. The informal lawn has been planted with primroses, spring bulbs, and cowslips and allowed to grow knee-high until June.

The placing of statues such as “Pomona, Goddess of Fruit or the Three Hesperides, Eagle, Aretusa and Hisperetusa” are best suited to the walled garden (Langley, 1728, p. 204). A life-size statue of Nimrod, ‘the mighty hunter’, with hound and boar, carved of dull yellow sandstone stands in the seclusion of the walled garden. The effects of weathering on Nimrod is an issue of concern, however, at the time of writing, safer surroundings have not been found.



Aerial views of Larch Hill.

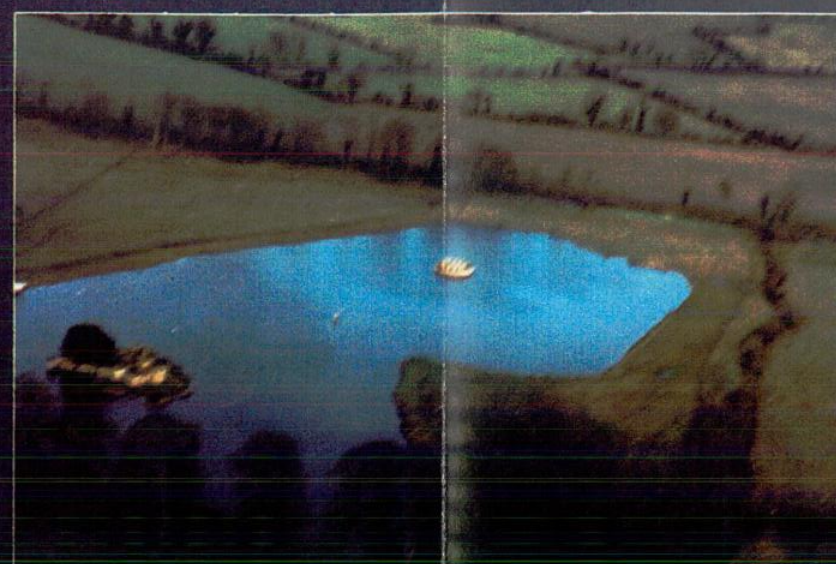


Plate XV
Aerial view dated January 22nd 1999.
(photograph: Walter Connor)
(Designed by Michael Kay)

CONCLUSION

"It is a pity you cannot spare a day or two to come and see me. My wood grows excessively pleasant, and its pleasantness vexes me; because no body will come that can taste it" (Shenstone, 1823, p. 123), Vol. III, Letters).

The surviving follies and features at Larch Hill are all the more important when one considers that, as far as I am aware, it is the only known intact *ferme ornée* in Ireland. The Leasowes at Halesowen near Hagley in England, now under restoration is not a working farm. Delville at Glasnevin with its aspects of a *ferme ornée* has long since disappeared. Woburn, at Weybridge, Surrey, England, is a school for boys. The headmaster writes "Sadly, I feel you would have difficulty in recognising the *ferme ornée* today" (Peake, 1998). Sir John Parnell's farm at Rathleague is presently being researched and is the subject of a further study. At Rathleague, it is recorded that the grounds were once adorned with rare shrubs and the now dried up artificial lake was "once the resort of many wild fowl" (O'Dooley, circa 1954, p. 64). Spence's plan for a *ferme ornée* at Aughnamullen, Co. Monaghan was possibly never carried to fruition. E. Charles Nelson writes that "this is the kind of garden which leaves no trace after two centuries" (Nelson, 1987, p. 17).

Garden History, Restoration and Archaeology, is a relatively recent and emerging discipline and has a long way to go before all the proper procedures and disciplines are put in place. This study is part of that on-going development. One cannot stress enough how fundamental our historic parks and gardens are as the building blocks with which we will establish the landscape of the future. It is imperative to pursue a programme of surveying, researching and recording our historic gardens and ornamental landscapes.

This programme involves a long and costly process, taking years before results are found and reports are prepared. In very important gardens in England and France and to a certain extent here in Ireland, these incredibly costly exercises have been undertaken. As already mentioned in Chapter 1, £1,306,500 has been awarded towards the restoration of the circuit walk at Leasowes. Theoretically, one should not touch a landscape without undertaking all the archaeological research. Had the office of Public Works undertaken the restoration work at Larch Hill as a National Monument, they

would have been in a better position with regard to this lengthy, complex and costly exercise. For individuals, as in the case of the de las Casas family, to undertake such an expensive exercise would be impractical. The funding from the Great Garden's Restoration Programme covers restoration only and is not sufficient to cover large-scale research.

For the future, funding must be available for the pre-restoration stage of historical research. It is anticipated that garden archaeologists will have a more important role to play in restoration projects and perhaps in the future, the Office of Public works would intervene in a case like Larch Hill and insist upon proper archaeological surveys and research before a landscape undergoes any restoration.

During the course of the interview with Patrick Bowe, he referred to the Dendrocronology Unit in Belfast, which can date a tree by removing a microscopic section with a tree borer. The section is examined under microscope and the tree is dated. This enables an overlay of tree planting from different periods to be made. Again had sufficient funding been available, it would have been possible to determine the age of the trees in the groves and around the belt at Larch Hill.

Speaking at the Association of Garden Trusts Annual Conference on September 5th, 1998, Tom Oliver, Property Manager at Croome Park, Worcestershire for the National Trust, analysed contemporary agricultural landscape, its design and management and how the eighteenth century tradition of the *ferme ornée* might be employed as design guidance for the future. During the course of his presentation, he advocated the use of woodland and water-bodies, with combined ideas and ornament, in a true Shenstonian way, helping the microclimate, animals, fowl and game. He stressed the importance of maintaining seed banks for the right sort of grasses necessary for appropriate conditions and situations. The removal of anachronistic planting was recommended and the considerable need to remove trees and replace them with more suitable varieties was suggested. In situations where the restoration of water-bodies was possible, the double issue of bio-diversity was emphasised and the necessity of establishing new swamp habitat before old areas are removed. Finally, it became clear that in his opinion, it was not possible to continue arable farming if water features are to be restored as pesticides and seeds interfere with the drainage system (Oliver, 1998).

The important issue here is the use of the principals derived from farming in a more effective, more productive, more aesthetic way. Loudon in the early nineteenth century, advocated the planting up of marginal land.

The effect of wild strawberries, violets and primroses, alchemella alpina, thymus saxifraga oppositifolia are singularly fine, and cannot be conceived by those who have always been accustomed to see the surface covered with a carpet of Rye-grass or poa trivialis"
(Loudon, 1802, p. 375).

The Shenstonian vision could very well be seen as an esoteric luxury, after all Shenstone became bankrupted. What the de las Casas are endeavouring to achieve and maintain at Larch Hill is a balance between the romantic and the spiritual, the ecological and the scientific where pleasure and production is harmoniously combined. This is an ideal situation of course as Michael de las Casas is an enthusiastic farmer with an interest in, and a knowledge of eco-systems and landscape husbandry.

An improvement in public awareness and an appreciation of the wealth of historic gardens and ornamented landscapes is what we must strive for as we plan for the landscaping of the future.

Paul Walshe, speaking at the Association of Garden Trusts Annual Conference made it clear that in order to return to the Shenstonian way of respecting and integrating nature, and the spirit of the place, 'the genius loci' we must ourselves become more demanding of the countryside.

We will demand a high policy countryside, a place of beauty for wildlife, for the new to blend in with the old, a healthy place, producing healthy food. An accessible place which we can enjoy and appreciate and a place which in its many parts and individual landscapes is distinctive, a distinctiveness which tells you that this is a special place, a fusion of man and nature, of the past and the present, which is different from any other place on earth.
(Walshe, 1998)

Now, at the end of the twentieth century, would seem a propitious time to examine and evaluate our attitude to the landscape and the countryside. Michael and Louisa de las Casas are responsible for maintaining a sense of where they stand in the eternal balancing act between man and nature.

*To ev'ry Part he may his Care extend, And these Delights all others
So transcend, That we the City now no more respect, Or the vain
Honours of the Court affect, But to cool Streams and Aged Groves
retire And th'unmix'd Pleasures of the Fields desire, Making our
Beds upon the Grassy Bank, For which no Art but Nature we must
thank.*

(Rapin cited by Langley, 1728, p. 206)

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