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Portarlington & 1798, John Stocks Powell, Frenchurch Press, 1998, 095162993X, 9780951629932,
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Portarlington was founded in 1666, by Sir Henry Bennet, who had been Home Secretary to Charles II and to whom that King, on his restoration, had made a grant of the extensive estates of "Damasagh, Viscount Clanmalier, confiscated after the Irish Rebellion of 1641. After some difficulties, the grant passed to Sir Henry Bennet of all the "Damasagh lands in the King's and Queen's Counties, and on 14 April 1664 he was created Baron Arlington of Arlington in the County of Middlesex. So great was the anxiety of these new settlers to efface all ancient recollections in Ireland, that the Parliament of Orrery and Ormond enacted that the governor and council should be able to give new English names instead of the Irish names of places; and that after a time such new names should be the only ones known or allowed in the country. In accordance with this enactment the borough created in Cooletoodera (Cail an tSdaire), received the name of Port-Arlington, or Arlington's Fort.[3]

Fifteen or more Huguenot families who were driven from France as religious refugees settled on the ashes of Bennet's colony, and the settlement was unique among the Huguenot settlements in Ireland in that the French language survived, being used in church services till the 1820s and continuing to be taught in the town school.

On the outskirts of the parish lies Lea Castle. The remnants of a great Norman castle built in 1260

by William de Vesey. It changed hands many times during its violent history, for example, it was burned by the O'Dempseys in 1284, rebuilt by de Vesey and given to the king, burned along with its town by the Scots army in 1315, burned by the O'Moores in 1346, captured by the O'Dempseys in 1422 and then lost to the Earl of Ormond in 1452, used by Silken Thomas Fitzgerald as a refuge in 1535, mortgaged to Sir Maurice Fitzgerald in 1556, and leased to Robert Bath in 1618. It was used by the confederates as a mint in the 1640s rebellion until Cromwellians blew up the fortifications by stuffing the stairways with explosives. The castle was never used as a fortification again.

Trescon mass rock is a stone used in mid-seventeenth century Ireland as a location for Catholic worship. Isolated locations were sought to hold religious ceremony, as Catholic mass was a matter of difficulty and danger at the time as a result of both Cromwell's campaign against the Irish, and the Penal Laws of 1695, whereby discrimination and violence against Catholics was legal. Bishops were banished and priests had to register thereafter. In some cases priest hunters were used.

The rebellion of 1798 resulted in several local men from Lea castle, being apprehended and subsequently put to death by hanging in the town's market square. A memorial in the shape of a Celtic cross with the rebels details was commissioned and erected in 1976. The memorial stands close to the perimeter wall of the French church in the market square .

Two borough minute books have survived and in the National Library of Ireland Ms 90 for 1727â€“1777, and Ms 5095 for 1777â€“1841; they reveal the limitation of freemen, and increasing control by the Dawson-Damer family, the Earls of Portarlington. (See also John S. Powell, *The Portarlington maces and its borough history 1669â€“1841*, 2011). Imperial political democratic practices was responsible for turning Portarlington into a perfectly rotten borough. The reason was to preserve the planters positions politically and economically. Below is an extract that shows that a corporation of 15 people were solely responsible for the persistent re-election of perfect strangers to parliament to represent the other 2800 people.

Prior to the legislative Union between Great Britain and Ireland, this borough sent two Members to the Irish Parliament; since 1800 it has returned one to the Imperial Parliament, and so close has been this corporation, that for 50 years previous to the last general election, the nominee of the Dawson family, commonly a total stranger to the borough, was always returned without a contest. According to the Parliamentary Returns of May 1829 and June 1830, the number of electors, resident and non-resident, was 15; that is, all the members of the corporation. Inquiry held 21, 23, and 24 September 1833, before John Colhoun and Henry Baldwin.

Portarlington is split by the River Barrow. With County Offaly on the north bank and County Laois on the South Bank. The town is mostly flat, with some slight street undulations. The town was partially built on the river's flood plain. Better drainage recently has resulted in fewer floodings to areas close to the town.

The southern end of the town is dominated visually by another glacial hill, know locally as 'Corrig'. This hill is topped by a stone structure called the 'spire'. The spire was built the latter half of the 19th century. Next to the spire is the town's water supply reservoir. The reservoir uses the gravity afforded by the hill to supply water to the town below.

In recent years the towns location in relation to Dublin coupled with its railways services, assisted the town to grow, by attracting many people to relocate. This growth in population was a welcomed change from the near population stagnation suffered throughout Ireland for generations. However, recent developments locally and nationally has resulted in the unemployment levels rapidly rising, with ever lengthening dole queues, with recent repts in *The Leinster Express* on th 11 August 2010, showing 3,406 people signing on the dole in Portarlington.

In 2012 RTE chose Portarlington as the focal point for the TV show *Dirty Old Towns*. The town was filmed extensively over a number of weeks as the local people, under the eye of presenter Dermot Gavin, changed what was becoming an eyesore into what has become a much more colourful and vibrant town. The show ran for 6 weeks with a lot of focus in each episode on the work carried out

by local people and businesses. The show's producers remarked on the fantastic response to the call and the tremendous effort put in by all to see the town transformed. The most striking addition to the town was along the banks of the River Barrow where enormous red-painted letters spelling "L I F E" were erected. The original spelling was "L I V E" however when travelling from the Offaly side of the town it looked like the word "E V I L". Other additions to the town have been two all weather soccer pitches which have been Football Association of Ireland sanctioned for soccer schools. An old run down building along the main street revealed enormous potential and is under development as a boxing club, a conference hall and perhaps even a temporary cinema. The People's Park has been re-developed with new attractions for the many children of the town. Old shops have been redecoarated and closed premises have all been repainted. The old French School on the banks of the river had been neglected for many years and with help from Dulux paints and the local Lions Club it had a major facelift. The exposure from the TV show had a dramatic effect on the town, making it much more colourful and welcoming.

The town appeared in the 1993 Irish film 'Into the West', a touching story about a family from Ireland's Travelling community. Portarlinton, its Savoy cinema (now closed) and the nearby Lea Castle appear in the film. The town is also mentioned in Christy Moore's song 'Welcome to the Cabaret', featured on his 1994 album 'Christy live at the Point'.

An annual French Festival (Festival Francais de Portarlinton), which takes place annually around 15th–17 July, has been revived, having been dormant for seven years. The festival is now weekend-long with a wide range of entertainment to suit all interests, including music, dance, sport, history, food and a parade led by the festival Queen which includes local businesses, clubs, groups and schools. Festival goers can obtain many delights at the Town Market such as cheeses, pastries, soaps and accessories. A famous French delicacy otherwise known as "Escargot" can be enjoyed by all who take part in the festival's National Snail Eating Championships or "Championnats d'escargots National Eating". Enjoy music and dance to celebrate the French heritage. The entertainment provided over the weekend includes a carnival, arts & crafts, face painters, bouncing castles and much more. Since its revival the festival has grown steadily with more events and a healthier promotional budget drawing in larger crowds. So much so that the festivities now take in three full days and continue well into the night with outdoor live music from various artists drawing a large audience.

^ Raymond Hylton Ireland's Huguenots and their refuge, 1662–1745: an unlikely haven Page 194
2005 "The Bishop of Kildare did come to Portarlinton to consecrate the churches, backed by two prominent Huguenot Deans of ... Moreton held every advantage and for most of the Portarlinton Huguenots there could be no option but acceptance ...

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