

Two Watch houses in Tullylish

by Edward & Primrose Wilson



In 2006 the Follies Trust was formed by a group of people who share a passion for a motley collection of unusual buildings which enhance and enrich our landscapes, towns and cities. These structures – or ‘follies’ – are part of the intricate fabric of our history but, because they can appear to serve no useful purpose, are too often regarded as expendable. Follies have been described as statements of style, a passion, eye-catchers and buildings to delight. This somehow suggests that they are merely frivolous structures but this is not so. They were often built to provide employment in times of famine and hardship. The Follies Trust was formed to encourage the appreciation of Ireland’s cultural heritage and to promote traditional construction and building skills. It encourages and undertakes the conservation of Irish follies - including mausolea and monuments, follies, grottoes, garden buildings and other structures of particular beauty or historic, environmental, architectural or industrial significance - in their original setting.

Its first project was to restore the Greg and Rainey mausolea in Knockbreda graveyard, Belfast; in June 2009 it celebrated its first success with the launch of a publication entitled *‘Knockbreda – its monuments and people’*. The listed mausolea were transformed from ivy covered structure with plants growing out of them and broken urns lying nearby to fine architectural set pieces; the following year work started on the restoration of the third Knockbreda mausoleum – to Waddell Cunningham.

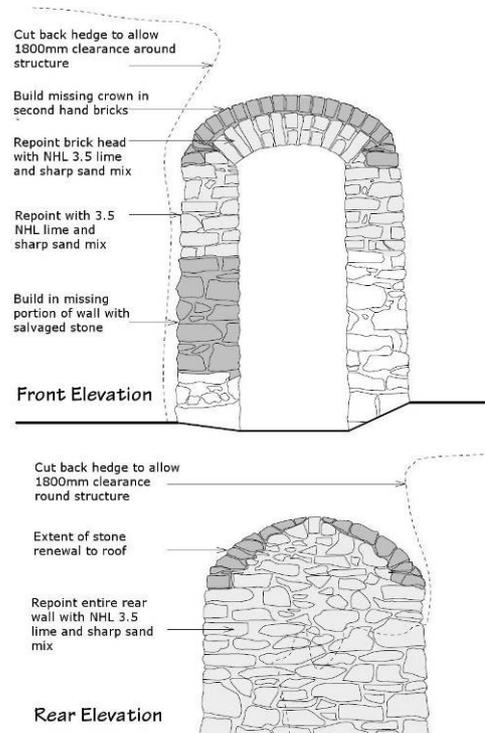
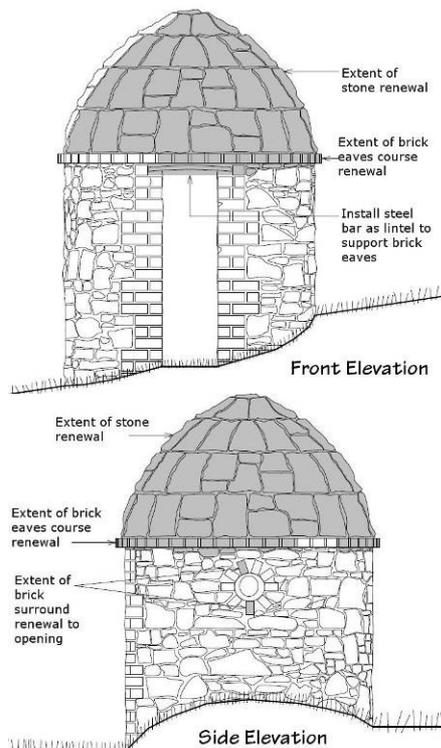
The conservation of three structures, known as Lord Limerick’s follies, near Newcastle, Co. Down, was the Trust’s next project. The follies, by the roadside on the edge of the Tollymore estate, are a hexagonal tower with a conical spire; a pair of cylindrical gate pillars with conical spires and bapstone decorations and a pyramid on a cube set into the demesne wall. These follies were erected in c.1780 and are attributed to the astronomer and garden building

designer, Thomas Wright. This scheme was undertaken in memory of the late Dick Oram, conservation architect and founder trustee of the Follies Trust. Other projects have included the conservation of the Stroan fountain in Thomastown, co. Kilkenny, and the Dennis mausoleum in Clonbern, Co. Galway. Two other books *Tollymore Park - the Gothick Revival of Thomas Wright & Lord Limerick* and *Clonbern graveyard – its monuments & people* were published in 2010 and 2011.

For its next project the Follies Trust is planning to conserve two watch houses in Tullylish, Co. Down. They were erected on the bleachgreens of Springvale and Millpark to shelter watchmen to guard the webs of linen spread out on the fields. The construction of one is described by Green as ‘the same as that of the round gate pillars common on Irish farms. The watch house ... is 3.6m high, built of coarse rubble masonry with brick dressings and coping. The walls are 0.46m thick and the interior diameter is 1.06m. The doorway is 0.46m wide and the round peepholes are 0.23m in diameter. The doorway has an iron lintel to support the weight of the masonry cap.’ (1) Clearly the structure was intended to house one person on watch but without any concessions to comfort as he could not lie down and there was a doorway but no door; there was scarcely room for him to sit. There are two watch houses marked in the same field in 20th century OS maps; one of these was removed and re-erected in the Ulster Folk & Transport Museum in 1967 where it can be visited.



At Tullylish, in an adjacent field, there is another watch house which may have belonged to Millpark Bleachworks; Green states that ‘John Christy bleached about 15,000 pieces a year in 1839’ on this site (2). The watch house is constructed of rubble masonry with brick dressings to the arched opening, barrel roof and peepholes. It is built at the top of a north facing slope and its overall width is 1.4m and height 2.08m. with an opening height of 1.74m. and width of 0.66m. The overall length of the structure is 2m. and as it is built into a slope the rear wall is only 1.34m high; the peepholes are 0.16m square. There was a stone seat against the rear wall (now broken). The fact that this watch house was built into a north facing slope (the others are on south facing fields) and is of a different design, with a barrel roof rather than a conical one, is interesting.



Millpark Bleachworks Bleachworks was described in 1781 as having 50 acres of land and 'a newly erected' house. The 1850s OS map marks six watch houses in the immediate area presumably for Springvale, Millpark and the other bleachworks.

In Tullylish there were several bleachworks including Springvale, Millpark and Banford on a short stretch of the river. The river Bann is the longest river in NI and the water quality and numerous falls on the Upper Bann made it particularly suitable for the manufacture and bleaching of linen. Bleach greens were located close to the mills where linen was manufactured; Lewis states that in 1772 there were twenty-six bleach greens on the river Bann. (4) There were three main processes in the industry - first the spinning of the yarn, then the weaving of the cloth followed by the finishing processes which included bleaching.

In its raw state linen cloth when woven was the natural brown colour of the flax yarn. In order to bleach the linen various methods were used including boiling and the use of chemicals. The use of sulphuric acid in the process led to the establishment of an Irish chemical industry; 'in 1764 two Belfast merchants, Thomas Greg and Waddell Cunningham, established the Vitriol island works at Lisburn' (5) In 2009-11 the Follies Trust restored the mausolea in Knockbreda to these two merchants! The action of sunlight on the webs of linen spread out on the fields known as bleach greens was part of the bleaching process and Edward recalls seeing linen on the bleachgreen at Banford and many other bleachgreens in the area in the 1950s.

The hazards associated with placing valuable webs of linen outside in a field included damage from straying animals and theft. The penalties for stealing linen were very severe - newspaper reports on the Assizes for Co Down in 1783 list several men who were sentenced to death for stealing and receiving the stolen linen from local bleachgreens. The paper goes on to comment that 'It may be hoped that the example of these unhappy wretches will prevent the practice of robbing greens, so injurious to a manufacture on which the poorest as well as the highest classes of the inhabitants of this country so much depend,' (6) Such harsh penalties remained in force until repealed in 1811.

The Follies Trust believes that these interesting structures are worthy of preservation in their original settings. One of the watch houses is listed and we hope that NI Environment Agency will list the other. It is amazing that these artefacts which once had a function as part of the linen industry have survived where they were first erected over a hundred years ago. Conservation work on the watch houses, using original construction materials and methods, is due to start in early summer 2013. The Follies Trust will provide information on the history and conservation of the watch houses of Tullylish on their website.

We conclude with a question. Why have only two watch houses survived in the Bann Valley in view of the fact that there were six extant in the 1850s in Tullylish alone? Is it because very few were built or was it because many were built and have subsequently been destroyed? We would be delighted to hear from anyone who can give an authoritative view on this!

The authors are grateful to the owner and lessee of the fields for permission to restore the watch houses and to Dr Finbar McCormick & Chris McCollum for information for this article.

a(1)(2) Green. E.R.R. *The Industrial Archaeology of County Down*. Belfast. HMSO. 1963. (Dimensions quoted converted to metric measure)

(3) Belfast News-Letter, 7 Dec.1781

(4) Lewis, S. A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland. London. 1837.

(5) Green. E.R.R. *The Industrial Archaeology of County Down*. Belfast. HMSO.

(6) Belfast Newsletter, 11 April 1783

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