What was Lisanally Lane for?

by Sean Barden

"The Lane"

It is not always true that familiarity breeds contempt but sometimes it prevents us questioning aspects of our neighbourhood that could bear closer examination. Lisanally Lane seems no different from other minor roads on the outskirts of Armagh and is so well-known to people from the area that they habitually call it "the lane"[1] Until recently it had never occurred to me to ask the question in the title; 'what was Lisanally Lane for'? The conclusion I reached and have outlined here may not be accepted by all but I believe it is a valid suggestion should merit further attention.

Roads rise and fall

There are many reasons why once great thoroughfares diminish in importance but most are tied to economic and social variations in the area they run through and serve. To stroll down, what is now just a small lane and recognize that hundreds of years ago campaigning armies marched along it or that it was an arterial coaching route brings to life that hidden past.

Nineteenth century maps of the area north east of Armagh city show a typical proliferation of small lanes. Over the years they were extended or neglected depending on the fortunes of the farms they led to. Sometimes they would join one another linking houses in a network but just one vacated dwelling might mean a section of lane way fell into disuse and returned to the fields. Mullynure Lane currently links Loughgall Road and Portadown Road and seems to be the preserved remnants of part of this network. Separate from but related to this web is Lisanally Lane which is distinct because it starts at the end of English Street in the city centre from where it strikes out into an historically important landscape.

Description

At the northern extremity of English Street Lisanally Lane, runs east from the junction of Banbrook Hill and Railway Street. It used to wander into the countryside in a north easterly direction. During the twentieth century it has become urbanised and serves the residential developments of Knockamell Park and Alexander Park presenting no clue that beneath the Tarmac there might be something a lot older.

It is only by walking its final few yards where the lane narrows and the surface becomes rough stones that a suspicion of its age becomes apparent. In this short section it passes over the Ballynahone River and turns under an imposing railway bridge. Emerging at the other side of the Victorian stone arch, a decaying iron gate opens into a wide field and here the lane abruptly ends.

Mapping the lane

If we look at how Lisanally Lane has been shown on maps over the past few centuries it becomes apparent that during the last 250 years it has not varied much in its course or extent.

The 1864 edition of the OS six-inch map (*fig 1*) shows the lane meandering in a north easterly direction before ending, as it does today, at the railway bridge. Longstone House is shown in the field beyond the bridge but the map illustrates no continuation of the lane in that direction. A gate lodge on Loughgall Road and a straight lane serves as an approach to the house instead.

The 1835 OS map (*illustrated on p2*) shows Lisanally Lane extending a little further than in 1864. On this map it runs up to the door of Longstone House but is depicted as an un-hedged path in this final stretch. As often happened the house acted as a key position linking two lanes and meant it was possible to leave Lisanally Lane, walk past the house and emerge on the Loughgall Road.

There are very few usable pre-OS maps of the area. John Rocque's plan

Fig 1.   Lisanally Lane on the 1864 6" OS map - North top

of Armagh from 1760 is not extensive enough to include the entire length of the lane but clearly shows it leaving English Street and abruptly turning north after a short distance. His county map (*fig 2*) which was published with the plan, traces its course as a mere hedge or field boundary which if it were not for the recognisable twists and turns of the lane might go unrecognised. It ends when it reaches the Ballynahone River but a short distance away on the other side of the stream Rocque shows a building perched in isolation on the hillside. If this is not Longstone House then it is a predecessor on the same site.
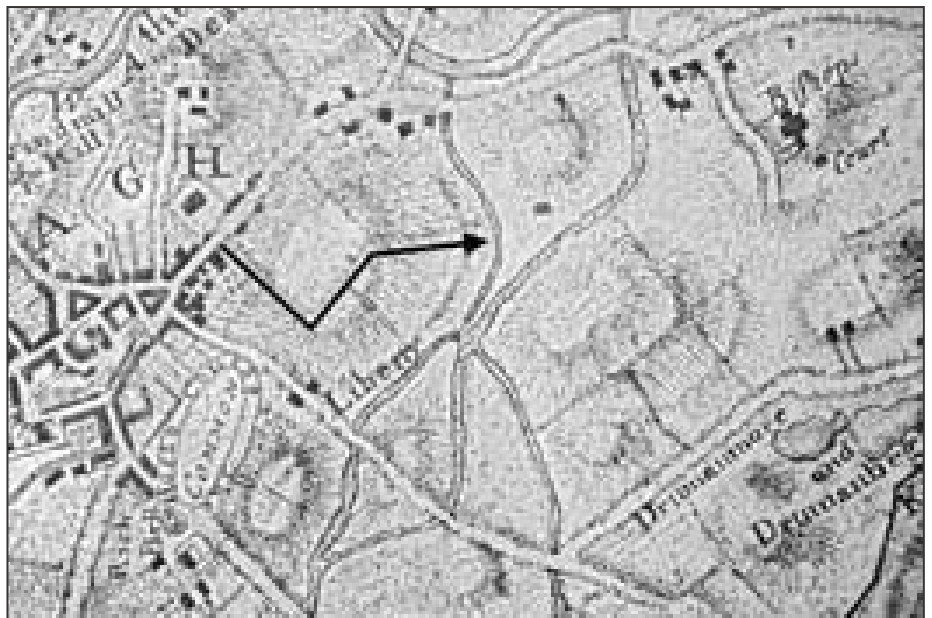
Early references

It is difficult to trace the lane earlier than 1760 as there are no known reliable maps of the area. However a survey of the Archbishop's lands by Thomas Ashe in 1703 includes the following description.

"Knockamell als Knockiamoile containing 67 acres 3 Roods and there are named in the Lease Cullomare als Cullomareoughtra Goosack Borenfeigh Ferrencrator Tirgon als Timegoonnn Girreneclog & Tireleny all wch. last menconed tho' I diligently inquired after them, cannot discover the Land by those Names. I called Severall old dwellers therabts. Together, (vizt) Patrick Mackellmurry, John Hunter & Robert Douglas & with them I had Capt. Tho: Dawson, but the names were Unknowne to them all, but they were of oppinion that the Gilles, Knockiamoile above Menconed and other Parks and Inclosures wch. are now held from the Lessee by the Revd. Mr. Delgarnoe and as they are hereafter bounded and Meared and Sett by the said Mr Delgarnoe to Andrew McBarnes, Henry Vernon, John Couser and Thomas Read are the same with the Denominacons before menconed & not known. John Couser above named has on his part a Farme house, Barne, Stable and Garden wch. is sett about with Sally Trees. Andrew McBarns has the like with some Apple Trees in his Garden. – Note betwixt the Two houses wch. stand near together is a very large thorn Tree wch. Stands by itselfe, and all the aforesaid Land lyes together noe other interest comeing betwixt, and is bounded with the Road from Armagh and Mr Bonds Comon Bogg West, The Road from Armagh to Killune and Mr Bonds Comon Bogg and the Chauntors park South Tulledegona and the Upper part of the

long Stone Land East and Ballenehone More River North. It is all good Land Well inclosed and near the Towne of Armagh."[2]

There are two contenders in Ashe's description for Lisanally Lane. It might be the Road from Armagh near Mr Bond's "Comon Bogg" although this might refer to Bannbrook Hill which was originally called Bond-brook. Another option is one of the lost names Ashe was searching for; *Borenfeigh* which can be translated as "The road of the gardens". This placename occurs in an early seventeenth century description of Armagh.

"On the twelfth of July, 1620, a grant was made by the crown to Sir Toby Caulfeild knight… [of] the abbey or monastery of the Apostles Peter and Paul;, or house of canons thereof, the buildings thereon, the cemetery, garden and orchard on the east side thereof, extending near part of the house called the archbishop's court , by the way called Borenefeighy west…"[3]

Caufeild's grant was of an area on the north and north eastern slopes of the ancient hill of Armagh. In this context the road would follow the course of modern day Abbey and Dawson Streets running downhill to Lower English Street. Although at first glance this is hard to equate with Ashe's road in Knockamell much further north, it need not be so. It is probable that the road extended from the Abbey complex on the hill to the lands described by Ashe.

So if the "road of the gardens" ran from the city centre through the lands of Knockamell it begs the question, where was it going to?

To try and answer this it might be better to take a close look at the countryside into which it led.

The landscape

There are several features of the area that mark it as one of special significance over the centuries. Historic monuments, even if they are now echoes in modern placenames recall that this landscape was once rich in historic sites. Ashe has already mentioned an isolated thorn-tree, a common enough but notable feature in the Irish countryside.

The name Lisanally suggests a *Lis* or early fortified farmstead in the area and indeed a rath stood between Alexander Road and Station Road until the mid nineteenth century when more than likely the railway helped obliterate it.

The name Longstone also suggests an historic monument and indeed the stone itself still stands in a field adjacent to the disused railway line. Although it could have been erected as long ago as 2500BC it has survived the much more recent rath in Lisanally. Raths are understood to have been fortified farms used during the first millennium AD but the function of

standing stones is rather elusive. Several suggestions include ancient grave markers (burials have sometimes been found close by). It is also suggested the stones mark a sacred place and people were interred there for that reason. It has even been speculated that they mark ancient routeways.[4]

Mullynure Abbey or Bishop's Court

There was however one very important medieval monument in the area under consideration, though nothing remains of it today. Mullynure Abbey or Bishop's Court stood on a low mound at the side of a large hill in Mullynure townland and was the Archbishop of Armagh's residence in the 13th and 14th centuries. It is mentioned several times in the Registers of Primate Sweteman, for example a letter written on 26 August 1373 was "Dated in the manor at (*infra*) the Lake near Armagh."[5] The flat meadows between the hill and Mullynure Lane even today are notorious for flooding and in 1848 the noted Armagh Antiquarian John Corry wrote. "The hill, at no very remote period, must have been completely insulated by water."[6] When quoting the translation above, Chris Lynn (who excavated the site in 1975) speculated why the editor had retained the Latin word *infra* in brackets in his translation. Lynn states that the term *infra lacum* occurs several times in relation to Bishop's Court and would usually mean "below the lake" but that in medieval documents it frequently meant "within". This evokes an image of the manor situated almost like an island with quite limited access, perhaps via a causeway.[7]

Corry's short essay on Bishop's Court is the most detailed account of the site before it was destroyed by quarrying. His observations of the meadows between Bishop's Court and the city include the following description.

"A few years ago, when labourers were making turf in the bog between the ruins and the city, they found two parallel rows of oaken stakes some feet apart, which evidently formed a road leading to the city; it terminated nearly opposite the old road called Lisanally-Lane which enters the city at the foot of Lower English-Street."[8]

So here we have a near contemporary account of the discovery of a buried road through the bog that had once been the lake surrounding Bishop's Court. Not only that but it ended " nearly opposite the old road called Lisanally-Lane". Although he doesn't explicitly say so, the implication must be that Lisanally Lane is the medieval road which led from the monastic centre of Armagh to the residence of the Primate at Mullynure. After Bishop's Court was destroyed by fire late in the 14th century the part of the road closest to the ruins gradually fell into disuse. With farm houses like Couser's and McBarnes' being erected nearby the road of course was kept and maintained. The location of the house depicted by Rocque in 1760 and later Longstone House, meant that the lane continued in use. When Longstone House was demolished in 1963 another few hundred yards of the ancient route grew over and was forgotten.

On a recent walk down "the Lane" the surviving section below Alexander Park sported a stout central strip of grass and lush green edges. Another short section of the 'road of the gardens' was returning to nature.

References

[1] *History Armagh* Vol.1, No.3, p9

[2] *A View of the Archbishopric of Armagh* by Thomas Ashe 1703, Armagh Public Library

[3] Stuart, J., *Historical Memoirs of Armagh*, Newry, 1819, p348

[4] Mallory, J.P. & McNeill, T.E., *The Archaeology of Ulster*, 1991; Mallory, *The Long Stone, Ballybean, Dundonald, Co. Down*, Ulster Journal of Archaeology, Vol 47, 1984, p1

[5] Lawlor, H.J., '*A calendar of the Register of Archbishop Sweteman*', Proceedings of Royal Irish Academy, 29C No.8 (1911), p286, No. 243

[6] Armagh Guardian 31 July 1848

[7] Lynn, C.J., *The site of the Bishop's Court, Mullynure, Co. Armagh*, in Seanchas Ard Mhacha, Vol8, No.1, 1975-6, p129

[8] Armagh Guardian 31 July 1848

Fig 3.   The flooded meadows surrounding Bishop's Court after heavy rain with St Luke's hospital in the background. (1982)