

# Charlemont Fort...

...a brief guide

by James O'Neill & Paul Logue

Charlemont Fort is a place well known to the readers of this magazine but the silent remains on the hill today belie a history more complex than most will be aware of. The enjoyment of any historical site is made up partly of fact and partly of imagination. We all have access to imagination but access to fact can be more difficult. In this new forum we hope that the following brief summary will help fuel the imagination and make your next visit (armed with magazine in hand, of course) all the more enjoyable.

## Beginnings

The genesis of Charlemont fort came with the closing phase of the Nine Years War in Ulster when, in the wake of Kinsale, Lord Deputy Mountjoy was attempting to force a conclusion on his terms. During the summer of 1601 he had tried to gain access to Tyrone's heartlands over the usual Blackwater crossing point and battleground of Portmore.

On that occasion the road to Dungannon remained

closed but a reconnaissance force sent northwards along the river identified the future crossing point at Charlemont.

On his return to the north, in 1602, Mountjoy manoeuvred his army with a confidence unthinkable in previous years and, on reaching Charlemont, made short work of clearing the passes and securing the crossing point. A bridge was built and a fort commenced to protect it. Mountjoy's cartographer, Richard Bartlett, illustrated the new fort as a square with four demi-bastions adjoined by an

outwork containing the proto-settlement of Charlemont (Fig. 1). The fort may have been developed from an earlier ringfort, as at Mountnorris, and would have stood where the present remains stand today, with the enclosed garrison housing and proto-settlement running from there down towards the river, in the grounds of the adjacent modern bungalow. Although the term 'artillery

'a fort of many other the best, and well furnished with men and ammunition'. The native outlook towards the new fort and settlement can be measured in that the cattle of the new townsfolk had to be brought into the ward each night for safety.

In 1620, Sir Toby Caulfield was commissioned to build a new fort, which he completed in 1622, reworking the defences into the now familiar form of four spear-shaped angle bastions and masonry walling with surrounding ditch. A gatehouse with a drawbridge was added to the southern curtain wall and platforms added within the bastions enabling the fort to mount heavy artillery pieces. Illustrated by Nicolas Pynnar, in 1624 (Fig. 2), these works included the addition of a three-storied governor's house for Caulfield, which, although it saw alterations, was to stand for the next 300 years. This new fort and house were thrust onto the stage

of Irish history during the war-wracked decade of the 1640s.

## The 1640s

On the night of 22 October 1641, around 10 or 11 o'clock in the evening, as part of co-ordinated Irish strikes across Ulster, a party under Sir Phelim O'Neill surprised and took the fort capturing the second Lord Caulfield along with his wife and the garrison of 97 foot and 2 officers. For the following nine years the fort was to stand as an island of Irish military strength at



Fig. 2: Charlemont Fort 1624

fort' is commonly used to describe this earliest Charlemont fort, it was not designed to mount artillery. The same is true of a small square sconce fort erected on the Tyrone side of the river to help protect the bridge; the sconce ramparts were pierced by small embrasures from which only fire from small arms was possible.

By 1603, Sir Toby Caulfield had been made governor of Charlemont and, with plans for plantation requiring military backup, in 1610 the fort was noted as

the centre of planted Ulster.

On taking the fort, O'Neill reinforced the defences by constructing a trench about the town. The line of that ditch, though filled in along much of its length, is still discernable in the property boundaries that run along the rear of the gardens behind Main Street. The town ditch was assaulted during July 1642 by an English and Scots force under Lord Montgomery who filled it in four places forcing O'Neill's men to retreat to the fort, firing the town as they went. Ultimately though, Montgomery was himself forced to withdraw after four days and Owen Roe O'Neill, grandson of Hugh, earl of Tyrone resupplied the fort in the following month. During this time Francis Sacher-ville, a prisoner at Charlemont, noted that the fort was garrisoned by 20 musketeers and 20 pikemen with 2 cannon, one iron and one bronze. We are told that Owen Roe, famed for his role in the defence of Arras in 1640, improved the defences of the fort but are not given precise details.

Shown on later maps, a ravelin - a triangular earthwork normally used to defend gateways - and covered way - a walkway cut into the counterscarp (outer edge) of the ditch - may be his work. During the late summer of 1643 the fort was closely blockaded by Major General Munroe. From Legar Hill, Munroe's men plied the fort with cannon shot and continually skirmished with Charlemont's defenders but made little progress up until a truce was concluded on the 15th September.

Under orders from the Council of Kilkenny, Sir Phelim O'Neill returned to Charlemont on 27th May 1645 with 150 men. His arrival proved timely, as three days later Munroe made the first of many further attempts on the town that summer. It held out once more and after O'Neill's crushing defeat of Munroe at Benburb on 5th June 1646, he provisioned the fort with supplies sufficient for 2-3 years. However, the fortunes of the Irish cause in Ulster rapidly declined following the high watermark of Benburb and, after

the annihilation of the Ulster army at Scariffhollis, on the 22nd June 1650, the attention of the Parliamentary forces soon turned to Charlemont.

The fort was again under the command of Sir Phelim O'Neill who further expanded the defences eastwards by fortifying a raised area in the bog (now the small townland of Annaghmacmanus), and occupying it with 2 companies of infantry. The siege opened in early July and lasted 6 weeks during which the battle-hardened Cromwellian army used everything at their disposal to prosecute a formal siege. Cannon and mortars reduced the defences and opened a wide breach in the east wall whilst a siege mine was under construction and saps (siege trenches) pushed to the counterscarp where it was intended to put a gallery across the ditch. On the 6th of August an attempt to storm the works was met with scalding urine, ashes and terrific defensive fire forcing the assaulting units to withdraw after 2-3 hours of fighting. Gallant as his defence

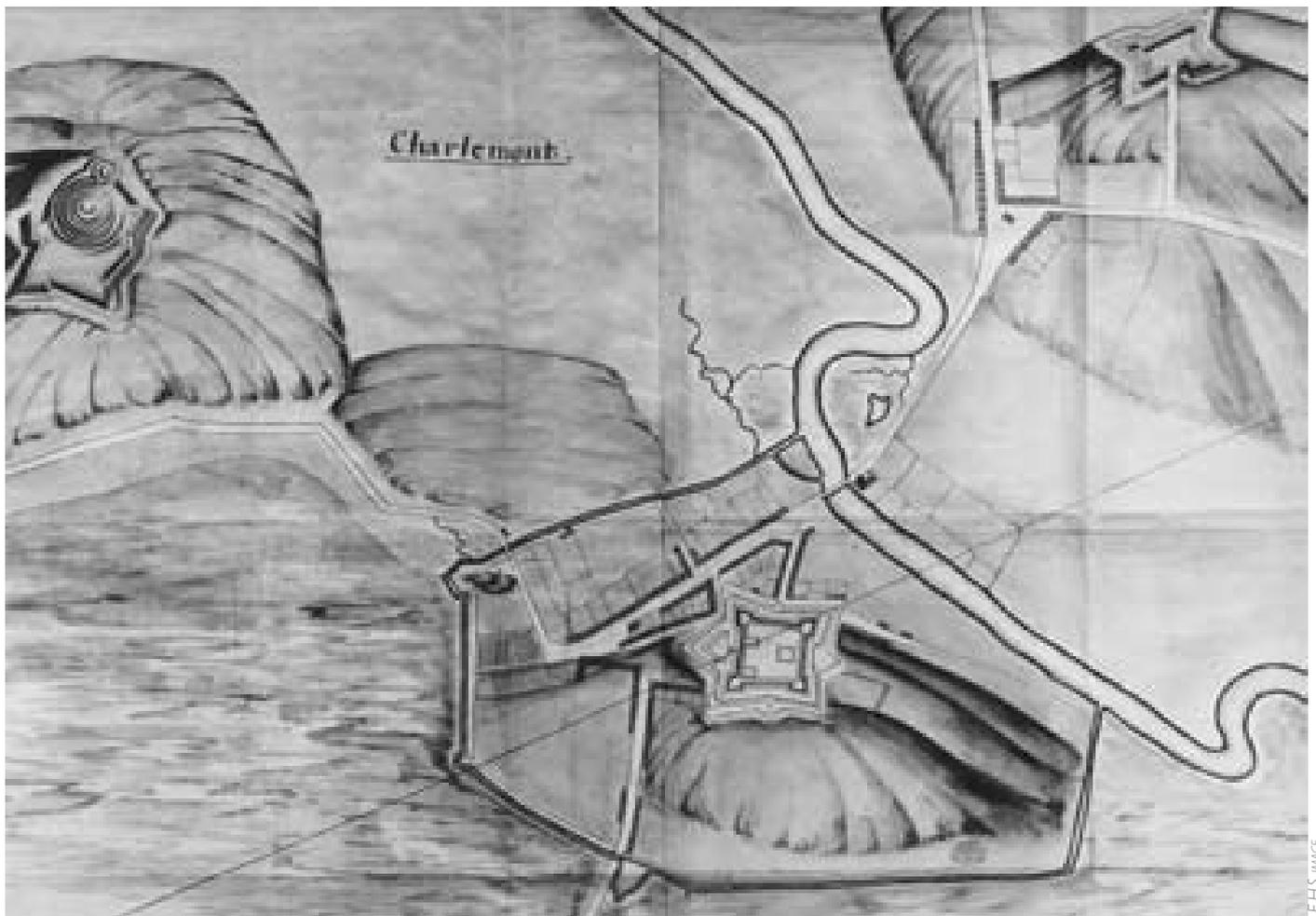


Fig. 3: Charlemont Fort and town 1685



Fig. 4: Charlemont, 1685 view from Moy

was, O'Neill knew that no relief would be forthcoming and, securing favourable terms for the surrender of the fort, he marched out with the garrison to join the Royalist troops in Connaught. The Parliamentarians claimed to have lost 50 men during the course of the siege, but according to at least one officer present they may have lost ten times that.

## After Cromwell

In 1663, the defences were rebuilt under the direction of Sir Matthew Appleyard who made good the damage caused by the Parliamentarian bombardment and refurbished the storehouse and gatehouse. In 1673, these repairs were continued by the Surveyor General of Ireland, William Robinson, who restored the roof of the house, improved the walls and cut a trench in front of the ravelin. The present gatehouse, though since refaced, was also built during this phase of reconstruction.

The most informative view we get of the 17th century defences of Charlemont is on

the 1685 map by Thomas Phillip's (Fig. 3). This shows the fort surrounded by a ditch in which sits the ravelin, through which the fort was accessed via two bridges. At the northern end of the fort is a place of arms, a large area behind the glacis where bodies of troops can be assembled under the protection of the covered way. There was also a ditch surrounding the town, which may have been backed by a rampart along most of its length. The water in the ditch was substantially provided by cutting into the River Blackwater with the Tyrone bank of the river still guarded by a small square sconce, similar to, if not a refurbished version of, that built by Mountjoy in 1602. Both Legar Hill to the south and the hill behind Moy C of I churchyard had been fortified by 1685, no doubt in an effort to defend dominating high ground around the fort. The remains of the fortifications on Legar Hill are still visible and are worth a visit in order to view the fort from that position. The remains of its sister fort overlooking Moy survive now only below ground. The town of Charlemont was also well developed by

this time with many English style houses shown in approximately the same layout as the modern settlement (Fig. 4). Some of these 17th century houses and street layout survive today as low earthworks close to the break in slope above the river north of the fort, whilst much of the rest will survive as below ground remains beneath the present town.

## The Williamite wars

War came to Charlemont again in 1689 and, on his way to the siege of Derry, James II actually spent the night there. Major Teig O'Regan was made governor of the fort in August whereupon he raised the counterscarp to equal the height of the wall, protecting the walls from all but point blank cannon fire. A siege resulted once more, though the Williamite troops did not have sufficient cannon to affect a breach in the defences. An attack, led by Colonel Caillimote, a French Protestant, was made on the night of 12th March 1690 in an effort to burn down the bridge. The attackers took the redoubt guarding

the bridge and the defences around the gate leading to Armagh but were forced to withdraw at dawn having failed to destroy their target. A mortar was employed against the fort but manure was spread thickly over the interior courtyard to reduce the effectiveness of the mortars explosive shells. Schomberg's arrival saw an intensification of the siege operations with fortifications constructed on Legar Hill in which he placed his artillery. A relief force under Colonel McMahon

made its way into the fort on the night of 2nd of May but was unable to exit again. On 11th May, with so many more mouths to feed and evermore Williamite troops arriving, O' Regan was compelled to ask for terms of surrender and, three days later, the garrison of 800 men marched out with full honours of war. On entering the fort, the besieging troops found that it was only a lack of food that forced the capitulation; no provisions were left but large amounts of military materiel

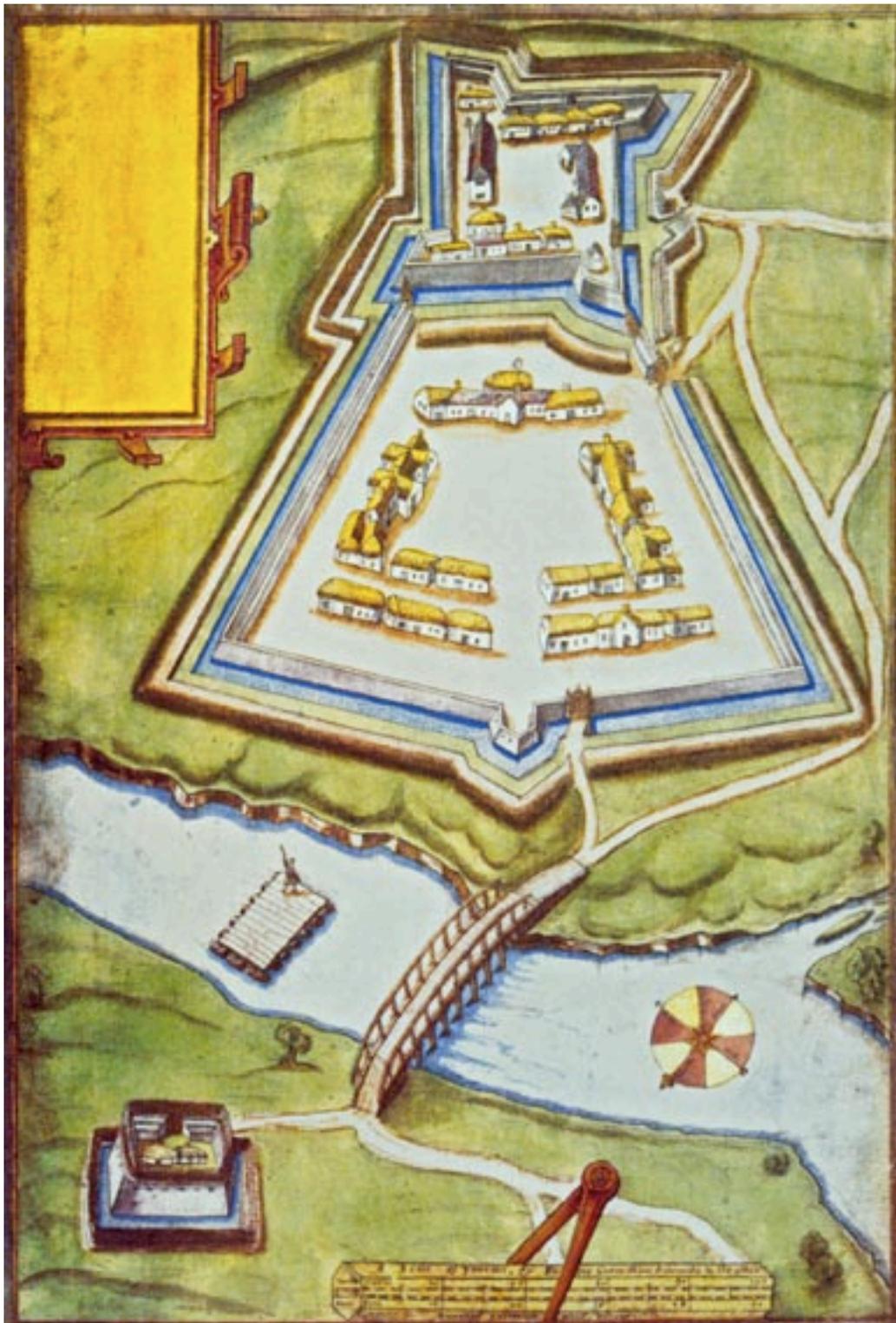
remained including 17 cannon, a mortar and 86 barrels of gunpowder.

## The 18th century to closure

During the 18th century the fort continued to be garrisoned but by 1746 the governor's house was no longer habitable. By 1760 the fort was in better repair, with newly built officers apartments, a kitchen, guardroom, gunners room, brew house, well, magazine and enlisted men's barracks. Further 18th century additions included an artillery barracks and Barrack Masters house, infirmary and gardens, which are still extant to the east of the fort. An artillery depot was also built but now survives only as below ground remains underneath Garrison Place.

Charlemont served on into the 19th century as a regular and militia barracks, but its usefulness as a military post gradually waned until the Government withdrew the last garrison on 14th February 1858. The fort and land surrounding it was purchased by Francis William, Earl of Charlemont, on 12th May 1859 for £12,884 5s. The forts defences and outbuildings were levelled and sold by public auction.

Having sought the owner's permission, the fort is well worth a visit. Its curtain and bastions are still marked by a low stone wall in turn surrounded by the reduced extent of the ditch, covered way and glacis. Robinson's gatehouse, its drawbridge chains hanging as mute witnesses to the forts turbulent past, now welcomes the native to one of Armagh and Northern Ireland's finest historical sites. Derry has been described as 'Siege City'; Charlemont surely is 'Siege Town'. ❖



E.H.S. IMAGE

Fig. 1: Charlemont Fort 1602