

The Airfield Archive at the OPW-NUI Maynooth Archive and Research Centre at Castletown

It is rare for any archivist to have the luxury of focusing all their energies on one collection for any length of time, and after a long-period of working in a busy local authority archive, it was a luxury that I thought I would never have again.

However, this was the opportunity presented to me when I took on the role of Project Archivist at the OPW -NUI Maynooth Archive and Research Centre at Castletown. The project involved the listing of the

extensive archive of Airfield, Dundrum and assisting in the preparation of a new exhibition at the house at Airfield. The project took over two years to complete and the exhibition was formally opened in May 2014 as part of a major re-development of the house and farm at Airfield.

The Airfield Archive (1805 -2001) consists of the private papers of the extended Overend family and of Airfield farm. It was transferred to the care of

the OPW-NUI Maynooth Archive and Research Centre at Castletown for professional listing, in 2010.

The Overend family

Trevor Overend (1847 - 1919), a successful Dublin Solicitor with a practice and home at 12 Ely Place, Dublin, bought the house at Airfield and eight acres of land in 1894. The small farm served as a country retreat for his family, consisting of his wife Elizabeth (Lily) Butler (1854-1945), his fourteen year old daughter Letitia (1880 -1977) and his baby daughter Constance (1894-1895).

A self-made man, Trevor was a member of the Law Society and the Kildare Street Club and moved in influential circles including with the La Touche banking family. In 1879 he married Elizabeth Anne Butler, known as Lily to her family and friends. The Butlers were descended from the Butlers of Cloughgrenan, a Baronet branch of the Butler family, the Earls of Ormonde. Based in County Carlow, Lily's father's estate was at Broomville, Ardattin.

In March 1895, Trevor and Lily Overend, together with their two daughters went to live at Airfield for the summer, keeping their home in Ely Place as their winter residence. As both Lily and Letitia Overend had a love of nature, animals and the outdoors, they were very much at home at Airfield. They immediately took to farming on a small scale, producing eggs, milk and butter. The family's arrival at Airfield was greatly saddened by the death of baby Constance Overend in September 1895, only a few days shy of her first birthday.



Sisters Letitia and Naomi Overend in a donkey drawn cart at Airfield c.1905

The Overends were fortunate to have a third daughter Naomi (1900-1993) five years later. They also enjoyed a happy and loving marriage and both had good relationships with their daughters.

Trevor died in 1919, leaving the estate to his wife Lily and the bulk of his fortune in trust for his youngest daughter Naomi. When Lily Overend died in 1945 the estate passed equally to Letitia and Naomi Overend, who both lived at Airfield for the remainder of their lives.

Letitia Overend, known affectionately to her family and friends as 'Tot', was born in 1880. From a young age Letitia was involved in charity work, including fundraisers for the Blind Asylum, having had a sense of social responsibility instilled in her by her mother. It is possible that because of this early influence that Letitia took her initial first-aid training course with the Saint John Ambulance Brigade in 1912.



Letitia Overend with her colleagues from the Saint John Ambulance Brigade c.1914

Letitia became a member of the Alexandra College Division of the Brigade in 1913 and when war broke out the following year, she and her colleagues were quick to join up as Voluntary Aid Detachments. Letitia was stationed at the Irish War Hospital Supply Depot, in Merrion Square, for the duration of the war. The Depot, a joint initiative between the Saint John Ambulance Brigade and the British Red Cross, sent vital supplies to hospitals in Ireland, Britain, France and Belgium, for the care of injured

servicemen. Letitia worked tirelessly at the Depot on a near daily basis, and occasionally brought her young sister in to help make tea for the workers. Lily also contributed, setting up a work guild at the house at Airfield, making bandages and clothing to send to the Front. Some documents from the Depot have survived in the Airfield collection, including, reports, circulars, photographs and correspondence. The collection also includes letters of appreciation sent from Irish soldiers to Lily Overend.



Volunteers at work at the Irish War Hospital Supply Depot during World War I

Letitia's involvement with the Saint John Ambulance Brigade was to continue for the rest of her life. She became Chief Superintendent of the Nursing Division and was created Dame of Justice of the Order of Saint John in 1955. In her archives she preserved a large collection of material relating to the Brigade including reports, circulars, leaflets, correspondence and photographs.

Through her work with the Saint John Ambulance Brigade, Letitia established life-long relationships with fellow members including Sir John Lumsden and Doctor Ella Webb. Doctor Webb had a keen interest in child welfare and recognised that many diseases were caused by poverty and malnutrition. With this in mind, Webb set about establishing the Children's Sunshine Home in Stillorgan, enlisting Letitia Overend's help. The home opened in 1925, as a convalescent home for

children suffering from rickets. Funded purely by donations, the home could not have been established without the generous donation of £5000 from Letitia Overend, which she gave in memory of her late uncle, Tommy Overend. The Children's Sunshine home became a life-long interest for Letitia. She worked tirelessly as a fundraiser for the home and acted as a member of the management committee until her retirement in 1961.



Letitia Overend with one of her award winning Jersey cows at the R.D.S. Spring Show

Although the Saint John Ambulance Brigade and the Children's Sunshine Home are the two organisations that Letitia Overend is best remembered for, she gave generously of her time and money to numerous Irish charities throughout her long life. In 1961, this contribution was publically acknowledged when she was awarded an honorary doctorate from Trinity College Dublin.

Letitia Overend had many other interests apart from her public works. She had a passion for cars and maintained her own Rolls Royce, which she purchased in 1927, for fifty years. She was also a member of the Irish Vintage and Veteran Car Club and participated in vintage car rallies with her sister.

Naomi Overend was born at Airfield in 1900 and must have come as a welcome surprise for the Overend family. She was a much loved child and grew up the centre of attention of the extended family. She had a much quieter nature than her sister but despite this, and the twenty year age gap, the two remained close throughout their lives.

Naomi shared her sister's awareness of public duty. As a child she became a member of the Children's League of Pity, a junior branch of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. She organised fundraising events at Airfield for the Dundrum branch of the League with the help of her mother. This interest was to extend into adulthood with Naomi taking part in the Dundrum branch of the Women's National Health Association, becoming the President of the Branch after her mother's retirement from the organisation.

Naomi also shared Letitia's many other interests, including cars, travel and the operas of Gilbert and Sullivan. She drove her own 1936 Austin Tickford and participated in vintage car rallies. From a young age Naomi also loved animals. Airfield was home to numerous cats and dogs and Naomi was a life-long supporter of the Dublin Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. This love of animals extended naturally to the animals on the farm at Airfield and to the building up of the Overend sister's award-winning herd of Jersey cows.

When originally purchased by the Overends, Airfield consisted of approximately eight acres in the middle of rich farmland in county Dublin. Over the years, Lily Overend and her daughters made shrewd purchases of various properties on their doorstep. With the purchase of neighbouring Eden Farm in 1964 the Overend sisters doubled the size of their holdings, bringing the estate to nearly forty acres.

Letitia Overend died in 1977 leaving the bulk of her

estate to her sister Naomi. Naomi died in 1993 leaving the estate in Trust. Today Airfield is a charitable Trust, which is open to the public for education and recreational purposes.

The Airfield Archive

The Airfield archive consists of over 25 thousand unique items, including 7,500 photographs. It also includes large collections of letters, diaries, registers, notebooks, invoices, financial accounts, scrapbooks, postcards, maps and newspaper cuttings, collected and retained by the Overend family.

The majority of the collection dates from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It gives a unique insight into the daily lives of the extended family and includes the papers of Trevor and Lily Overend, their siblings and daughters. Family documents of interest include the love letters of Trevor and Lily Overend, their letters to their daughters Letitia and Naomi as children, and letters and diaries of their Aunts Helen and Fanny Butler and Minnie Overend.

There are also a large number of documents belonging to T.B.G Overend (Trevor's youngest brother, a successful stock broker based in Calcutta, India and a founding member of its Stock Exchange), including the detailed diaries of his life in India, his letters home and documents relating to his business affairs. His diaries give an interesting insight into the ex-patriot lifestyle of a self-made man in India, where he enjoyed a busy social life and comfortable lifestyle.

In addition to the family papers, Letitia and Naomi Overend also kept a large number of items relating to their hobbies, interests and philanthropic works, which make up a valuable piece of social history. Most notable are the records of the Irish War Hospital Supply Depot, including a letter book with requests for supplies from army hospitals in France, Belgium

and Britain during the first World War. Also of interest are the records of the Dundrum branch of the Woman's National Health Association, the Saint John Ambulance Brigade and the Children's Sunshine Home.

Other items of note in this large collection include the diary of Fanny Butler during the 1916 Rising in Dublin and her subsequent letters to the army lieutenant who was stationed in her garden, the letters to Lily Overend from young men fighting in World War I, register of members of the Alexandra College Nursing Division who became V.A.D.'s and Minnie Overend's diary of her life in Egypt.

The Overend sisters also kept a large number of documents relating to their hobbies including, cars, travel, gardening and the farm. Included in the travel documents are a large number of photographs, booklets, letters, postcards, tickets and ephemera picked up along that way, including from Letitia Overend's World Tour with the British

Medical Association in 1935, and Naomi Overend's trip to India in 1936. The original guarantee for Letitia's famous car, issued by Rolls Royce Limited in June 1927, has also survived.

The Airfield Archive is of potential interest to both local and academic researchers. The collection, on one level, is the personal history of a Dublin family but it also provides an opportunity to study local and social history of the period.

The exhibition based on the archival collection of the Overend family is now open at Airfield, Dundrum. Additional information is available at www.airfield.ie

Ciara Joyce
Project Archivist
OPW-NUI Maynooth Archive and
Research Centre at Castletown