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St. Patrick's College,
Maynooth**

**The History and impact of the de Vesci family of
Abbeyleix, Queen's County, from 1698 - 1884**

by

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**IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF M.A.
DEPARTMENT OF MODERN HISTORY,
ST. PATRICK'S COLLEGE
MAYNOOTH**

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August 1997

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Acknowledgment

This work could not have been completed without the assistance of a large number of people. Thanks goes to the staff of the Department of Modern History, St. Patricks College Maynooth, and in particular to Professor Colm Lennon who supervised the thesis and who has my deepest gratitude for the help, encouragement, patience and advice provided over the year. I wish to acknowledge the staff of the national Library of Ireland and the Genealogical Office in Kildare Street, for their assistance in locating material for me. I express a special word of thanks to Colette O' Flaherty the archivist and to all the N.L.I. librarians who were perhaps unfortunate to be on duty when I visited and whom always remained cheerful, patient and helpful in the face of so many questions and requests for library material. A word of thanks to Laois County librarian Eamonn Phelan and to all the county council library staff Portlaoise for their help and assistance. A word of recognition also to the Dean of Armagh, very Rev. H. Cassidy, the Keeper of Armagh (Robinson) public library, Armagh, who helped me answer some vital questions. Thanks must also go to the library staff of J.P II library Maynooth, to Anna May who first suggested the de Vesci's as a research topic, to Louise, Lenora, Catherine and Adrienne who helped me at crucial times with the computer and to all those far too numerous to mention, who simply showed an interest. Finally for my good friends who have been there from the start offering all kinds of encouragement and distractions - Thanks girls!.

For Mam and Dad.

Introduction.

‘Whatever their origins, geographical location or original functions, a crucial factor in the development of many settlements during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was association with a particular landowner.’(1) What this thesis sets out to undertake is an examination of one such area, considerably influenced not in this case by the efforts of one individual alone, but rather by the combined efforts of generations of one individual land owning family. The location of interest is Abbeyleix, Co. Laois, the seat of each consecutive viscount de Vesci from 1776-1995. Abbeyleix, a town in Co. Laois, situated on the main Cork - Dublin road, became home to the de Vesci family in 1698 when Sir Thomas Vesey obtained the estate there through marriage (2) The estate remained in the de Vesci hands until 1995 when it was sold for a sum in excess of three million pounds.

The name de Vesci has been synonymous with Abbeyleix for centuries during which time ‘under the encouragement of the de Vesci family the neighbourhood was relatively fortunate.’(3) As this work unfolds it will, I hope, progressively highlight the reasons why Abbeyleix and its surrounding areas were fortunate to have this family as patrons. Its purpose is to document the story of the de Vesci family during the period 1698 - 1884 and to throw light on the aspects of local social, political and economic history.

The introduction of the ancient family of Vesey, Vescy or Vesci into Ireland and more specifically into Queen’s County dates back to the thirteenth

century. (4) It was not until the seventeenth century, however, that a descendant of this family, Sir Thomas Vesey, acquired the Abbeyleix estate through his marriage to Mary Muschamp in 1698. Inter-generational linkages ensured that the property passed down from one generation of de vescis to the next. In August 1730, when Sir Thomas died, the estate fell into the hands of his son, Sir John Denny Vesey who succeeded his father as second baronet. (5) However, the focus of attention for the purpose of this thesis will center around his successors, Sir Thomas Vesey, third baronet and first viscount de Vesce (1734-1804), John, second viscount de Vesce (1771-1855), and finally, Thomas Vesey (1803-1875) and his wife Emma (1819-1884), the third viscount and viscountess de vesce. Each of these three generations contributed something to the time in which they lived and each in their own way, left their mark on the local area. They touched almost every aspect of local life and made contributions to the educational, architectural, social, political and economic realms of the community in which they lived. Sir Thomas Vesey, first viscount de Vesce, undertook the building of Abbeyleix house.(6) John, the second viscount de Vesce, was a compassionate reformer and he established five schools in the area, while Thomas and his wife Emma, the third viscount and viscountess de Vesce, together proved to be a most enlightened and humanitarian couple.

Abbeyleix is a classic example of an estate town situated in close proximity (approx. 2 km) to the landlord demesne. The estate itself was a compact and concentrated one, while up to the present day powerful visual symbols remain

which demonstrate the leading role the family had in local society. Despite all these factors however, and despite the existence of a large collection of de Vesci estate papers in the National Library of Ireland, no detailed examination of the family, for any period, has been produced. The aforementioned de Vesci papers, provided essential primary source material, which proved crucial in the compilation of this work. The collection of papers comprises c. 22,000 documents dating from 1552 to the present day and includes maps, plans, surveys, drawings, account books, inventories, wages and cash books, rentals, rent receipt books, architectural material and various other documents typical of landed estates. It also includes the letters and papers of each individual viscount de Vesci. Numerous other primary sources were also drawn upon including, among others, the obituary for the third viscount de Vesci printed in the Leinster Express newspaper 1 Jan. 1876, and the Queen's County Statistical Survey of 1801 by Sir Charles Coote. A wide variety of secondary sources also illuminated various aspects of de Vesci history and these included articles in periodicals, newspapers, magazines and printed published works such as Patrick F. Meehan's book The Members of Parliament for Laois and Offaly 1801-1918 (Portlaoise, 1972). For a summary of the life and work of each individual viscount de Vesci, I was fortunate to find in Laois Association Yearbook 1986 (Dublin, 1986) an article entitled 'More famous Laois men', again by Patrick F. Meehan. A second article, also to be found in this publication, was extremely useful in my examination of the de Vesci influence on the type of education offered to young local children. This article is titled, 'Pestalozzian

influences in Abbeyleix Schools' and was written by Philomena Sheeran. Another excellent source I uncovered was a newspaper article by James Fleming in the Weekly Irish Times dated Saturday 12 June 1937. The heading reads 'Historic Irish Mansions, Co. Leix, no.58: Abbeyleix House, Co. Leix, viscount Vesci's residence.' For a detailed account of the history of Abbeyleix house and of descriptions of the house itself Great Irish Houses and Castles by Jacqueline O'Brien and Desmond Guinness was of great value. While other more general works were also useful, many made no specific mention to Abbeyleix or the de Vescis, and were used therefore more for comparative purposes.

This work, therefore, drawing on a wide range of sources, aims to provide an account of the de Vesci family and the effect it had on the shaping of Abbeyleix down to 1884. Chapter one sets out to give an account of the de Vesci family and estate history and examines their ancestral origins and Inter-generational linkages. Chapter two focuses on the first viscount de Vesci (1734-1804) and on his son, the second viscount. It looks at, in particular, the educational endeavours of the second viscount and attempts to highlight his innovation in this field. The center of attention for the third and final chapter is placed on the third viscount and viscountess de Vesci and its purpose is to examine aspects of their history and record the influence they had on the local environment from 1803-1884.

The de Vesci archive is of foremost importance not only in local terms but also in Irish National terms. No other Queen's county landowning family has left behind a collection comparable in size and importance to the de Vesci papers and

yet at the same time so little has been written about them. It is hoped that on completion of this work a coherent picture will have emerged of this landowning family and the positive influence they had over generations on the local physical, social and political environment from 1698 to 1884. Finally, I hope that on its completion I will have successfully argued the case that a crucial factor in the development of the Abbeyleix settlement in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, was its association with the de Vesci landowning family.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) M.D Evans, Aspects of Irish Genealogy II (Dublin, 1986) p.28
- (2) Revs. J Canon O Hanlon and E.O Leary, History of The Queen's County Vol.1 (Dublin, 1907)
- (3) T.W Freeman, Pre-Famine Ireland: A study in Historical Geography (Manchester, 1957) p.198
- (4) John Burke Esq., A General And Heraldic Dictionary of The Peerage And Baronetage of The British Empire Vol. 1 (London, 1832) p.352
- (5) *ibid.*
- (6) Patrick F. Meehan, 'More Famous Laois Men', Laois Association Yearbook 1986 (Dublin, 1986) p.28

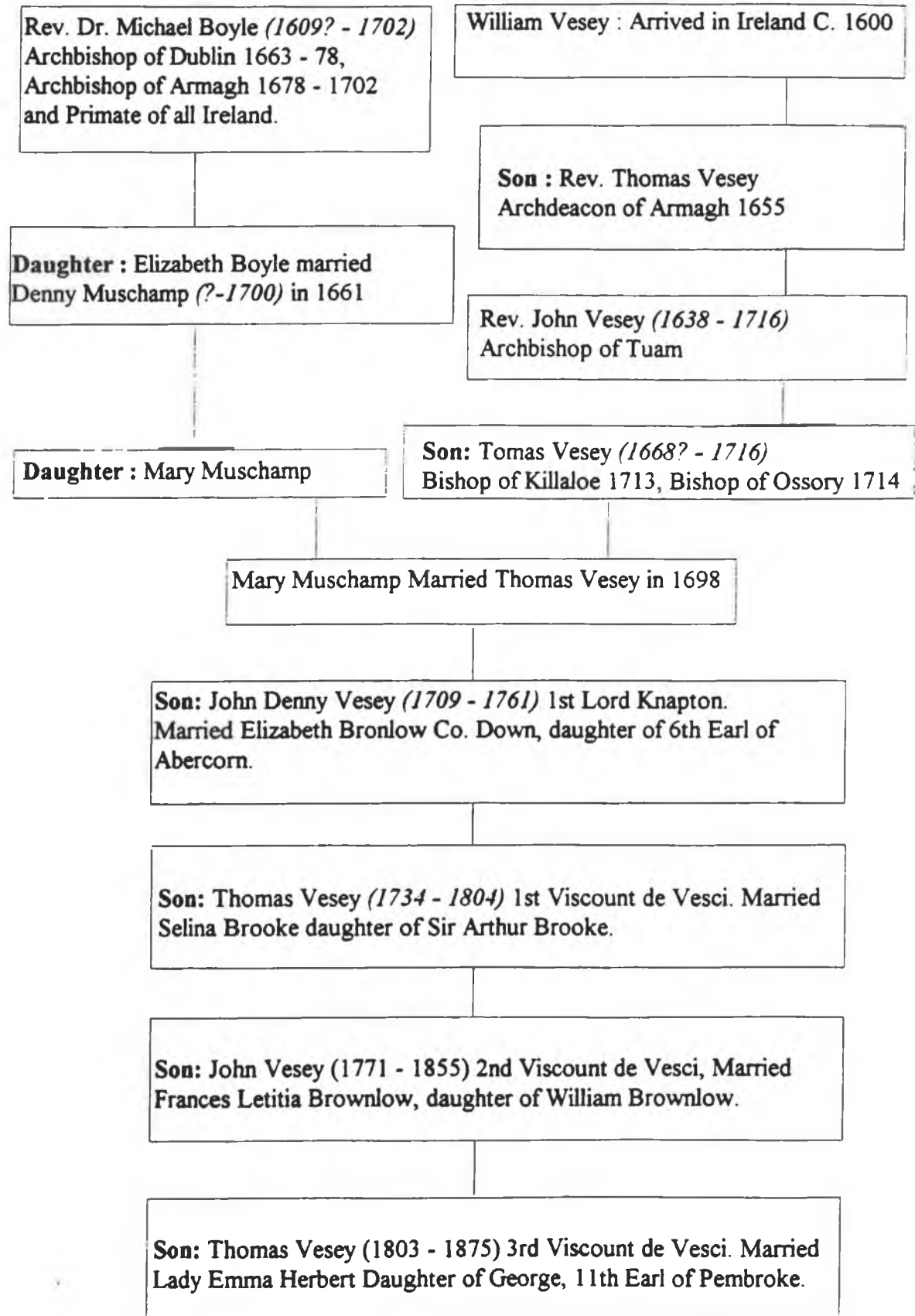
Chapter 1.

The illustrious family of de Vesci trace their descent from John Earl of Comyn and Baron of Tonsburgh, in Normandy, the son of Baldwin II, founder of the house of Blois in France.(1) The ancient family was first introduced into Ireland in the thirteenth Century when William Vesey (1249?-1297) arrived. However at what point precisely during this century he did arrive appears difficult to ascertain. According to some sources he is said to have built the Castle of Lea near Portarlinton, Co. Laois, in 1260.(2) However a much later date than this for his arrival seems more likely. Supporting this premise is the fact that it was not until 1290, with the death of his mother, that he came to inherit large estates in Ireland while it was the same year which saw him appointed justice of Ireland.(3) By the end of 1290 he had by all accounts established himself in the country yet complaints were soon to arise against his government in Ireland. In October 1293 they were laid before the king who appointed a commission of inquiry. At the same time Sir John Fitzthomas, lord of Offaly, one of the Fitzgeralds, fiercely quarrelled with Vesey. Fitzthomas began to spread an elaborate tale to the effect that Vesey had accused the king of personal cowardice at the time of the siege of Kenilworth and had solicited him to join in a conspiracy. Eventually the case against Vesey was dropped and he regained the king's favour, though not the government of Ireland. In December 1295 he was sent to Gascony, France, in the service of the king.(4) The mythical Geraldine version of the story of course sees Vesey's

employment in France as representing his fleeing beyond the sea to avoid his antagonist, Fitzthomas. In any case, he died in 1297 leaving no male heir and so the male line of the family was continued by his brother, Thomas de Vescei. He settled in Newland, Cumberland, where the family continued to reside until a descendant again by the name of William Vesey having killed his antagonist in a duel fled to Scotland, but settled later in the north of Ireland during the reign of Queen Elizabeth.(5) He was succeeded by his only son, Thomas Vesey, who became archdeacon of Armagh in 1655.(6) His son and successor, John, followed his father into the church. Born in Coleraine in 1638, (7) he was educated at Westminster and Trinity College, Dublin. During his lifetime he was twice lord justice of Ireland, was a privy councilor and a chaplain to the Irish house of commons. He was dean of Cork from 1667-72, was consecrated bishop of Limerick on 12 January 1672 by Michael Boyle, archbishop of Dublin, and in 1679 was promoted to the archbishopric of Tuam.(8) His eldest son, Thomas, also rose through his service in the Church of Ireland being consecrated bishop of Ossory in 1714.(9) However, earlier in 1698 he had the foresight to marry the granddaughter of archbishop Michael Boyle, primate and lord chancellor of all Ireland. This brilliant marriage brought with it the acquisition of the Abbeyleix property which was the generous marriage portion from Denny Muschamp, the father of the bride.(10)

Denny Muschamp of Horsley, Surrey, was a successful seventeenth century land speculator who had made purchases of land throughout ten counties

DE VESCI PEDIGREE DESCENT



in Ireland, yet he was also a tax farmer and adviser to his father in law, Archbishop Boyle. He was muster master general of Ireland in 1677 and purchased the constablership of Maryborough, Queen's County in 1679.(11) The background to Muschamp's acquisition of the manor of Abbeyleix in 1675 was particularly colourful and resulted in two major phases of litigation which were to overshadow estate proceedings until 1769. The first phase of litigation was over his means of acquisition of the manor and the second concerned the fee or the reversion of the manor.(12) The former is particularly important since it provides an excellent backdrop to de Vesci's acquisition of the estate, a brief account of which is outlined in the following paragraph.

In 1183 Conogher O Moore had founded a Cistercian abbey at Abbeyleix (Clonkeen as it was then called) which it is often suggested occupied the site of an earlier abbey established in 600.(13) With the dissolution of the monasteries during the reign of Henry VIII, church land became the property of the English crown and subsequently the land of this religious foundation at Abbeyleix was confiscated and granted in 1562 to Thomas Butler, earl of Ormond, in recognition of his service to his country. However, he died without male issue and so by 1637 the manor was again safely in the hands of the Crown.(14) In 1663 it was leased to one Sir Edward Massey for ninety nine years. With the death of Sir Edward in 1674 the property became the inheritance of his nephew and namesake, yet by 1675 the trustees of the will had sold the manor for £2,500 to Denny Muschamp for a ninety nine year term.(15) This was to initiate a conflict over the manor which lasted over

one hundred years, during which time a law suit case arose between Muschamp on the one hand and the beneficiary of the Will, Edward Masey II, on the other. Having been previously heard in the Irish and English courts of law and the Irish and English house of lords the case was eventually determined upon by the Irish house of commons and in Muschamp's favour, by which time he had handed the property over to his son in law, Sir Thomas Vesey. However, this was not to be the end of the legal battle as a further dispute was to arise concerning the fee of the manor, a dispute which was to last until 1769 with Sir Thomas Vesey being succeeded in the lawsuit by his son, Sir John Denny Vesey (1709-61) and grandson, Thomas Vesey (1734-1804).(16)

Intergenerational linkages ensured that the estate at Abbeyleix passed down from one generation of de Vescis to the next. In August 1730 when Sir Thomas died, the estate fell into the hands of his only son, Sir John Denny Vesey, who succeeded his father as 2nd baronet.(17) He was elected M.P for Newtownards, Co. Down, and held the seat until 1750 when he was elevated to the peerage of Ireland as 1st baron Knapton of Queen's County. He married Miss Elizabeth Brownlow, daughter of William Brownlow of Lurgan, Co. Armagh and granddaughter of the 6th earl of Abercorn. During the Jacobite rising in Scotland he remained loyal to the house of Hanover and in 1745 had been duly appointed lord lieutenant and governor of Queen's County (18).He died 25 July 1761 and was succeeded by Sir Thomas Vesey, 3rd baronet. It was he who undertook the building of Abbeyleix House. He helped to stamp out Whiteboy activity in

Abbeyleix and for this was raised a step higher in the peerage, becoming first viscount de Vesce (19). He died 13 October 1804 and was succeeded in estate and title by his son, Sir John Vesey, 2nd viscount de Vesce. This pattern continued as Sir John was succeeded after his death in 1855 by Sir Thomas Vesey who became the 3rd viscount de Vesce and the fifth consecutive generation of de Vesces to be involved with Abbeyleix. (20)

The estate itself was a compact one. At the turn of the nineteenth century it was estimated to have contained about 1,000 acres, by which time, it also had a fine modern mansion surrounded by an extensive well wooded demesne. 'The estate of Abbeyleix contains one thousand acres, about seven hundred of which are in the demesne. The mansion house is modern and very elegantly finished, a large square building, fronted with cut stone, and four stories high. The farm yard and offices are extremely well appointed; the plantations and full grown timber cover a great tract of ground'. (21) The number of trees in the demesne alone was estimated at 14,997 c.1810. (22) In The Beauties Of Ireland (Dublin, 1826) Brewer stated that 'the demesne is very extensive, and greatly enriched with woods, of a fine and venerable growth, which are, in several parts, formed into ornamental, and truly noble avenues.' (23) The lands of the estate were spread across a vast number of townlands, the numbers of which obviously increased with the increase in the size of the property. Most of the land of the estate was in the townlands of Boaley, Clonohill, Derrylaghan, Knapton, Deerpark, Demesne, Grallow, Grallow Bog, Granafallow, Branra, Clonkeen, Ballymullen, Ralish,

Ballymaddock, Knocknamoe, Rathmoyle, Tunduff, Ballytasna, Blackhill, Poormans Bridge and Tulle Roe.(24) By 1876 the size of the estate had increased dramatically to 15,069 acres. (25) This expansion arose from the purchase of additional lands by each viscount in the county including, for example, the purchase made in the early 1870s by the third viscount, of half of the Watercastle estate situated between Abbeyleix and Dunmore.(26) By the time it reached 15,069 acres in extent, it contained land also, in Colt, Togher, Killamuck, Curraghacronacon, Redhills, Corbally, Gracewood, Island, Kilnamuck and Knockmays. (27) Extended over all these townlands however, the de Vesci landed estate was never to be enclosed by a demesne wall, as the family were held in such high repute that it was never thought necessary to construct one.

The completion of the furious litigation over the manor of Abbeyleix in 1769 saw concerns for the most part of a legal and financial nature dwindle. Within a decade of the resolution of the case, the issue seemed to be one belonging to a distant past. By 1778 the 1st viscount de Vesci had acquired a section of the Dunleary Estate in Co. Dublin, property which had originally been owned by Denny Muschamp's father in law Michael Boyle. This inheritance was to produce an addition of £1,100 a year to the family's income and meant that the family now not only had land in Cork, Limerick and Queen's County but also in Co. Dublin. (28). It is not surprising therefore that life for de Vesci's at this time was comfortable and unencumbered. A letter written in 1778, (the same year that the Dunleary property was inherited) by Lady Caroline Dawson, future countess of

Portarlington, to her sister certainly suggests that this was the case. She writes 'Now I must give you an account of Lady de Vesce's. I am quite in love with her and with their manner of living. It is without form, everybody doing as they please and always a vast number of people in the house. Lady Knapton, his mother, lives with them, and seems no restraint upon anyone, she is so good humoured. We were about six or seven ladies and as many gentlemen divided into different parties about the room, some reading, some working, some playing cards, and the room very large and very full it had a most comfortable appearance.'(29) The most visible aspect of this comfort for tenants on the estate and for locals alike, was the magnificent mansion itself which had the intersecting river Nore winding through its grounds in a pleasing serpentine form. The de Vesce's themselves were looked upon as distinguished residents, as landed gentry and as protestant aristocrats, their titles baron, baronet and viscount further adding to their discernment by signifying a degree of heraldic distinction.

Within the period 1698-1776 the de Vesces were to raise themselves in terms of their order and position within the peerage and baronetage. On 28 September 1698, the same year as his marriage to Mary Muschamp, Thomas Vesey was created a baronet of Ireland. His son John, became 2nd baronet in 1730, but in 1750 he was elevated to the peerage of Ireland as 1st baron Knapton of Queen's County. His son, Sir Thomas Vesey, 3rd baronet and 2nd baron Knapton was raised a step higher again in the peerage becoming 1st viscount de Vesey on 22 June 1776.(30) These titles duly conferred upon the de Vesce's were

dignified degrees of hereditary distinction and signified honour, merit and eminence.

By 1884 therefore, the de Vesce family had firmly established themselves in Abbeyleix. Their lands, mansion house and titles of distinction personified their privileges and made their status and importance visible. Their history, however, had been a chequered one, coloured for the most part with legal concerns over the question of ownership of the estate. Three of the family's forebears, archbishop John Vesce, Denny Muschamp, and archbishop Michael Boyle were prominent figures in Irish history. Their leading importance in their own right makes them very significant in Irish national terms, yet their contribution to the making of de Vesce family history coined them into figures of equal importance in local terms. In any case, by 1884 the de Vesce's had established themselves as leading Irish landlords. However, far from proving that they belonged to the parasitical category of landlord or that they had the short sighted mercenary attitude of the typical proprietor they were, during the period 1698-1884, to prove to be among the most humanitarian and enlightened members of their class.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) John Burke, A General And Heraldic Dictionary Of The Peerage And Baronetage Of The British Empire Vol. 1 (London, 1832) p. 352
- (2) Patrick F. Meehan, The Members Of Parliament For Laois And Offaly 1801-1918 (Portlaoise, 1972) p.43
- (3) Sir Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee (ed.), Dictionary Of National Biography Vol. XX
From the earliest times to 1900 (Oxford, 1921-1922) pp.288-291
- (4) *ibid.*
- (5) John Burke, A General And Heraldic Dictionary Of The Peerage And Baronetage Of The British Empire Vol. 1 (London, 1832) pp. 352-353
- (6) Rev. James B. Leslie, Armagh Clergy And Parishes being an account of the clergy of the church of Ireland in the Diocese of Armagh, from the earliest period, with historical notices of the several parishes and churches.
(Dundalk, 1911) p.50
- (7) Notes concerning John Vesey, Archbishop of Tuam 1638-1716, n.d (N.L.I., Townley Hall Papers, MS 10,353)
- (8) Rev. James B. Leslie, Armagh Clergy And Parishes being an account of the clergy of the church of Ireland in the Diocese of Armagh, from the earliest period, with historical notices of the several parishes and churches.(Dundalk, 1911) p.50
- (9) John Burke, A General And Heraldic Dictionary Of The Peerage And Baronetage Of The British Empire Vol. 1 (London, 1832) p.353
- (10) Revs. J Canon O Hanlon and E. O Leary, History Of The Queens County Vol 1 (Dublin, 1907) p.774
- (11) A.P.W Malcomson, Catalogue of de Vesci Papers, special list no. 404 N.L.I (Dublin, 1996), Introduction pp. 4-5.
- (12) *ibid.*, pp.7-8
- (13) J.Canon O Hanlon and E.O Leary, History Of The Queens County Vol. 1(Dublin,1907) PP.150-151

- (14) *ibid.*, p.153
- (15) A.P.W Malcomson, *Catalogue of de Vesci Papers*, special list no. 404 N.L.I (Dublin,1996) p. 7
- (16) *ibid.*
- (17) John Burke, *A General And Heraldic Dictionary of the Peerage and Baronetage Of The British Empire* Vol. 1 (London, 1832) p.353
- (18) Patrick F. Meehan, 'More Famous Laoisemen', *Laois Association Yearbook 1986* (Dublin, 1986) p. 28
- (19) Alan Sutton, *The Complete Peerage* Vol 2 (Great Britain, 1982) P.307
- (20) Revs. J Cannon O Hanlon and E. O Leary, *History Of The Queens County* Vol. 1 (Dublin, 1907) p.774
- (21) Sir Charles Coote, *Queens County Statistical Survey* (Dublin, 1801) p.62
- (22) Slim unbound calculation of the number of trees in the demesne, c.1810 (N.L.I, de Vesci Papers, MS P 41)
- (23) J. N Brewer, *The Beauties Of Ireland* ; being original delineations topographical, historical, and biographical, of each County. Vol. II (London, 1826) p.126
- (24) Map of Abbeyleix manor lands, n.d (N.L.I, de Vesci Papers, MS O Box 2)
- (25) *Land Owners In Ireland 1876* Return of the owners of land of one acre and upwards, in the several Counties of Cities, and Counties of Towns in Ireland, to which is added a summary for each Province and for All Ireland. (Dublin, 1988) p.75
- (26) Letters and papers of the 3rd viscount de Vesci about the joint purchase by Robert Stapels, Queen's County and him, of the Watercastle estate, 1868-74 (N.L.I., de Vesci Papers, MS M 112)
- (27) Bound Volume reference to the valuation of the estate of the Rt. Hon. Lord de Vesci, 1842-1844 (N.L.I, de Vesci Papers, MS O Box 2)
- (28) A.P.W Malcomson, *Catalogue of de Vesci Papers*, special list no.404 N.L.I (Dublin,1996) Introduction p.4

(29) Desmond Guinness and William Ryan, Irish Houses And Castles(London,1971) p.226

(30) Dr. Edmund Lodge, The Peerage And Baronetage Of The British Empire As At Present Existing (London, 1868) p.180

Chapter 2.

Thomas Vesey, the only surviving son and heir of John Denny Vesey, was born in 1734 and succeeded his father as 2nd baron Knapton on 25 July 1761. He married on 24 April 1769 Selina Elizabeth Brooke, daughter of the Right Honorable sir Arthur Brooke (1). On 19 July 1776 he was created viscount de Vesci of Abbeyleix and he took for his title the ancient Anglo-Norman form of the family name. When recommending him for the viscountcy, Earl Harcourt wrote 'Lord Knapton was formerly in the army. He is a man of very respectable character and has particularly distinguished himself in the suppression of the disturbances occasioned by the White Boys'.(2). He opposed the rebellion of 1798 and helped to keep Queen's County quiet during that turbulent period. In the Irish house of lords, he and the 2nd duke of Leinster, led the opposition against the Act of Union.(3) He was a benevolent and improving landowner and was very much concerned with the development and improvement of Abbeyleix. One of his first acts upon succeeding his father was to redesign the half ruined town of Abbeyleix and rebuild it as an Irish model town.(4) Moreover, it was he who was responsible for the building of Abbeyleix house.(5) This not only provided him with an estate nucleus from which to administer local affairs but it was also a powerful visual symbol which demonstrated his leading role in local society.

It was only when the lawsuit over the ownership of the estate was nearing its end that the first viscount's thoughts turned to building. In 1769 he had the estate surveyed by Bernard Scale.(6) By August 1772 he had made an agreement with William Colles of Co. Kilkenny for stone cutting work for Abbeyleix House and in 1773 the foundation stone was laid. (7) James Wyatt (1747-1813), a young and fashionable English architect was commissioned to design the house. John Martin Robinson writes, in the sale catalogue of the contents of Abbeyleix house 25 April 1995, 'He chose James Wyatt as his architect, and Wyatt's designs dated 1772 still survive, divided between the three Wyatt albums in the National Library, Dublin, the Metropolitan Museum, New York, and the Victoria and Albert Museum London'.(8) Although later remodeled in the mid nineteenth Century by the third viscount, the house when first built was three stories high and had a seven bay facade surmounted by a low Pediment.(9) Abbeyleix was Wyatt's first work in Ireland yet he later went on to design such houses as Castlecoole, Enniskillen, County Fermanagh, a house which was executed to the highest architectural standards for the earl of Belmore.(10)

'The classic estate town is situated in close proximity to a landlord demesne, its formal planned appearance, complimenting the style of his big house'.(11) Originally the village of Abbeyleix was low-lying, situated on the bank of the river Nore, near Abbeyleix House.(12) It was demolished in about 1780 when the first viscount 'caused the old town to be entirely raised, and laid out the present on a more eligible site'.(13) Over 800 Irish towns of varying size possess

some evidence of having been laid out or remodeled by the owners of landed estates between 1700 and 1845.(14) Abbeyleix is a typical example of such towns, where here, the landlord planned and built a new town with a wide, tree lined main street, cut stone houses and a good water supply.(15) In 1826 Brewer had this to say about Abbeyleix; 'The houses are marked by the most ornamental features compatible with true, and rustic, cottage character. To each is attached a useful garden; and an air of rural beauty, rendered additionally valuable by the appearance of domestic comfort pervades the whole well organised village'.(16)

Landowners were motivated by a variety of reasons to invest in urban development. The most important factor, however, was an economic one. Towns provided landowners with an estate nucleus from which to sell agricultural produce. When the first viscount de Vesci re-located Abbeyleix, the new town was situated on the main Dublin to Cashel road, thus providing greater opportunities for trade and commerce. However urban improvements had benefits for tenants too. It was their town as much as it was the landlords and it provided them not only with a market to buy and sell produce but it also provided a central meeting place for the whole community.(17)

Selina Elizabeth Vesey, the first vicountess de Vesci, was far from idle while her husband pondered over and engaged in, architectural ventures. Sir Charles Coote tells us she established a highly commendable charitable institution at Abbeyleix, namely, a lace manufactory which gave employment to 50 poor girls, the profits of which provided the money for their maintenance and education.(18)

On 15 February 1771 she had given birth to their first son and heir, John Vesey, later fourth baronet, third baron knapton and second viscount de Vesci.(19) It is not surprising, with his mothers interest in education and his fathers in improvement that John was to inherit an intrinsic interest in local education and in the development of Abbeyleix.

John Vesey was educated both in Ireland and England. He married on 25 August 1800 Frances Laetitia, the fifth daughter of his great uncle, the Right Honorable William Bronlow of Lurgan, Co. Armagh. She died on 6 June 1840 at Kingstown, yet, John lived on until his death in October 1855.(20) A man of many excellent qualities and enlightened views he was a most amiable landlord and nobleman. 'It might be said that he devoted his time to acts of kindness; and the prosperous condition of his tenantry is the best index to his high character as a landlord.'(21) Moreover, he had a paternal interest in the development of Abbeyleix and was an instrumental figure in effecting its improvement.

He was elected M.P for Maryborough in the Irish parliament on the death of Samuel Hayes in 1796 but he lost his seat in the election of 1798. He was a colonel in the Queen's County militia and helped to keep Queen's County peaceful during that turbulent period. Like his father he strongly opposed the Act of Union in 1800. He was a lord lieutenant of Queen's County for the period 1831-55 and became a representative peer of Ireland 19 January 1839 in place of Lord Farham of Co. Cavan, a position he held until his death in 1855.(22)

John, second viscount de Vesci, had a genuine interest in the improvement of social conditions for all classes, and his actions appear to have been guided by his humanitarian principles. He was a compassionate and conscientious landlord and was extremely charitable to the local people during the difficult famine years. On 30 October 1846 he issued a notice to his tenantry in Queen's County detailing a relief in rent. In this notice de Vesci stated 'In consideration of the severe infliction of an all wise providence, in causing a blight on the potato crop of this country - and deeply sympathising with you, under your loss, I am anxious to alleviate, as far as I can, with justice to you and myself, this common calamity; I have therefore directed my agent to make the following abatements on the years rent due May last;

6s. 8d. in the pound on all rents under £10 per annum.

5s. 0d. do. do. do. £20 do.

2s. 6d. do. do. do. £50 do.'(23)

Proving that he was compassionate, he also showed himself to be a conscientious and improving landlord. It was under his patronage according to Brewer that Abbeyleix became 'one of the neatest and most pleasing villages in the province of Leinster.'(24) The old town of Abbeyleix had been entirely taken down by his father and a new town or village founded on a more suitable site.(25) Great improvements to the new town were effected by the second Viscount who followed the trend of improvement initiated by his immediate predecessor. It was he who was responsible for the construction of many of the towns fine buildings,

including the Market House on Main Street which is of significant architectural quality.(26)

The second viscount de Vesci was also concerned with improvement of a different kind. He had an inherent interest in the field of education and he imposed revolutionary changes in the type of education offered to local students. The practice of donating money towards local schools was not uncommon among landlords. Lord Erne made regular payments to the schools at Lifford and Ballindrait, and Sir George Hodson helped to build and maintain three schools on his estate in County Cavan.(27) De Vesci also helped to build and maintain local schools, yet he appears to have been much more enlightened than most other landlords of the time in that he was aware of the need for an improvement in the type of education offered in such schools. Accordingly, sometime in late 1817 or early 1818 de Vesci founded the Abbeyleix Pestalozzian Institute for the education of the sons of upper class gentlemen.(28) In 1826 Brewer noted that 'At this place [Abbeyleix] is a school of some celebrity, for the education of young gentlemen, which is conducted under the patronage of Lord de Vesci, on what has been termed the Italian mode, of blending gymnastic tuition with the usual forms of education.'(29) What Brewer is almost certainly referring to here is the Abbeyleix Pestalozzian Institute in which de Vesci advocated the use of a Pestalozzian type methodology.

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), a Swiss educationalist, was among the first to recognise the increasing need for an improvement in popular

education. He believed instruction should proceed from the familiar to the new and that the pace of work should be in keeping with the pupil's level of development.(30) Such ideas were certainly advanced in the early 1800s when rote learning and harsh discipline were central features of contemporary education. Among Pestalozzi's other innovations were ability grouping, the individuality of each student and formal teacher training(31) - the importance of each having been recently stressed in the White Paper on Education and all of which just under two centuries after Pestalozzi's death are still central features of the Irish educational system. Pestalozzi established a school at Yverdon and encouraged those interested to visit. Many of those from Britain and Ireland who did exactly that went on Synge's advice. The first was Lord de Vesci who became a generous patron of the Pestalozzian method and who in the summer of 1816 spent four weeks at Yverdon.(32) 'John, second viscount de Vesci of Abbeyleix, Queen's Co. Ireland (1771-1855), was lord lieutenant of his county and much concerned with the welfare of his people. He was in touch with William Allen about the organisation of a society for the suppression of mendicity, and on his advice instituted district visiting associations and soup houses. He opened on his estate a school for 'rich children', his own and those of his friends, in which the teaching was done according to Pestalozzian principles, and he supported Pestalozzi's poor-school in Switzerland by large subscriptions.'(33) This estate school at Abbeyleix was among the three Irish Pestalozzian schools of the early nineteenth century. The first one was established by John Synge at Roundwood in Co.

Wicklow. The second was the Abbeyleix Pestalozzian Institute which enjoyed a reputation for its high educational standards, while the third was founded in Co. Cork by C.E.H Orpen for the education of the underprivileged and handicapped.(34)

The president of the Abbeyleix Institution was viscount de Vesce, while its visitors are listed as Rev. James Dunn, Rev. Robert Daly, John Synge Esq., Mr. Sergeant Le Froy, James D. La Touche Esq. and Charles E.H Orphen Esq.(35)

The objective of the institution was to provide a school where parents could place their children, with the expectation that the good principles which they would have taught at home would also be impressed upon the children's minds at school.(36)

In a type of school prospectus for the year 1820 the following statement is recorded. 'While, however, the moral and religious improvement of the children is the great end to which the regulations of the institution will be directed, the visitors cannot but consider the improvement of the understanding and the acquisition of useful knowledge as points of essential importance; they have, therefore, reserved a considerable annual sum to be expended, in procuring suitable masters, for the instruction of their pupils, in the usual branches of school education; and it is their desire and intention, that the pupils be instructed in them, in the best and most perfect manner in their power.'(37) The method of teaching at Abbeyleix appears to have aroused a great deal of favourable comment among interested Irish educationalists of the time so much so that in 1821 the Pestalozzian method of teaching arithmetic, practiced at Abbeyleix, was recommended for

adoption by the Kildare Place Society for its model school in Dublin.(38) Although no evidence survives indicating just how long the Abbeyleix Institute survived, the school did receive its last known mention in the letters of Pestalozzian enthusiasts in 1823.(39) However it is quite likely to have existed for a number of years after that, possibly until 1827 when the great Swiss master himself died.

In 1820 the Abbeyleix Pestalozzian Institute had as one of its terms of admission a fee of ten guinea's entrance and one hundred guineas per annum which was to be paid quarterly in advance.(40) Considering this high fee and considering the fact that de Vesci himself sent his two sons, Thomas and John William, to the school, it is reasonable to ascertain that the Abbeyleix Institute was concerned only with the education of a privileged class. However the second Viscount was an advocator of the Pestalozzi principle that pupils of all classes were to be given access to schooling, and so he became involved with the education of local children who had both upper and lower class, Catholic and Protestant backgrounds.

In a report from the commissioners of Irish education 1826-27, reference is made to a further two schools established by Lord de Vesci at Abbeyleix. The first is the Abbeyleix parish school where Joseph Dobbs, a Protestant, was appointed by Lord de Vesci as master.(41) The number of pupils in attendance at this school at the time of the report was recorded as eighty five, forty of whom were Roman Catholics and the remainder Protestants of the established church. The school opened in 1814 and was mixed, unlike that of the Abbeyleix

Pestalozzian Institute which catered for boys only. The patrons of the school, as expected, are listed as Lord and Lady de Vesci who contributed £11. 7s. 6d. towards the costs, and who built the school house.(42) The second school listed in this report of 1826-27, is Knapton which opened 4 March 1824 and again catered for both boys and girls. It had one hundred and forty pupils in attendance, of whom, twenty three were Protestants of the established church and the remaining one hundred and seventeen, Roman Catholics. Again Viscount de Vesci is listed as contributing towards the building of the school house.(43) Of greater significance, however, is the fact that de Vesci appointed Kildare Dobbs as master of the school. The significance here lies in the fact that Kildare Dobbs had been trained at John Synge's Esq, Roundwood, Co. Wicklow and perhaps was appointed by de Vesci specifically for this reason. In any case his familiarity with Pestalozzian methodology, suggests that he would have employed that approach in the school at Knapton.(44)

There is clear evidence to suggest that de Vesci established, in addition, two more schools in Abbeyleix - one a boys school which had an attendance of approximately eighty pupils and the other a girls school which also had an attendance of approximately eighty pupils.(45) Thus, there were five very different educational establishments under the guidance of the second viscount de Vesci at Abbeyleix. Since all these schools were set up during the heyday of Pestalozzian influence by a man who clearly advocated the use of the Pestalozzian approach, we can reasonably assume that the theory of education proposed by the Swiss

educationalist was implemented, at least to some degree, in each of these schools. This theory of education centered around Pestalozzi's demand that the functions of the body be brought into harmony with the activities of the mind and heart. At the core of Pestalozzi's argument was the notion that practical education or physical education was essential for the education of the whole person. He regarded gymnastics as an essential part of the liberal education of man, saying that, 'In relation to the body it assists man in the independent use of his physical powers and their best possible use; in relation to his morals it enables him to make the spirit govern the flesh.'(46) This theory of education was likely to have been implemented, in some form or other, in all of de Vesci's schools, however, the method of teaching or of implementing the Pestalozzian curriculum may have differed from school to school depending on the type of student the school catered for. Sheeran, for example, has suggested that the de Vesci Institute may have been modeled on Pestalozzi's Yverdon school for fairly well off children, while the other four schools at Abbeyleix might have been run more on the lines of the Orphans' school which Pestalozzi had established at Stanz.(47)

John Vesey, died at Pontaferry House, Co. Down on 9 October 1855.(48) Although his funeral had been notified as private, a large number of the inhabitants of Abbeyleix and of the surrounding neighbourhood accompanied it.(49) A memorial to him, erected in 1860 from public subscription, still stands today in market square, Abbeyleix. The testimonial is twenty feet square and twenty five feet in height and was designed by the architect John S. Butler of Hume Street.(50)



In 1860 the following was written about the structure. 'That memorial will not be a mere useless heap of stones, but combining the useful with the ornamental, will be a sanitary boon to the inhabitants of the town and contain an open reservoir for water, from which the thirsty cattle may "drink deeply". From the center of the reservoir rises a handsome structure in the Italian style, enclosing a water tank from which the basin is supplied.(51) The words inscribed on the memorial in 1860 read, 'Erected in memory of John, second viscount de Vesce. By public subscription A.D 1855'. This act of the local inhabitants, itself speaks volumes for the type of landlord he was.

John, second viscount de Vesce, like his father, was a compassionate and enlightened reformer. He pioneered the pestalozzian method of education, remnants of which remaining alive in Abbeyleix schools for sometime after his death. He laid the foundations of an improved system of education locally, and promoted the international development of pestalozzianism. Furthermore, he carried on the tradition of improvement established by his father who is particularly associated with the building of the present house at Abbeyleix and the accompanying re-location of the village. 'Abbeyleix, formerly a place of some distinction, as the principal seat of O' More, the head of a powerful native sept, is now entitled to the attention and admiration of the topographer, in a superior degree, on account of the great improvements effected by the present noble owner of this estate, the viscount de Vesce, and his, immediate ancestor' .(52) It is clear then, that, between 1734-1855, this father and son took a paternal interest in the

progress of Abbeyleix and were chiefly instrumental in ensuring its political, educational and architectural development.

Footnotes

- (1) Alan Sutton, The Complete Peerage Vol. 2 (Great Britain, 1992).
- (2) *ibid.*
- (3) Patrick F. Meehan, 'More Famous Laoisemen', Laois Association Yearbook 1996 (Dublin, 1986) p.28
- (4) Jacqueline O' Brien and Desmond Guinness, Great Irish Houses And Castles (London, 1992) p.114
- (5) *ibid.*
- (6) John Cornforth, 'Abbeyleix, Co. Leix, Ireland: The seat of viscount de Vesci', Country Life 26 Sept. 1991
- (7) Agreement between Lord Knapton and William Colles for stone cutting work for Lord Knaptons house, 7 Aug. 1772 (N.L.I, de Vesci Papers, MS K15)
- (8) A.P.W Malcomson, Catalogue of de Vesci Papers, special list no. 404, N.L.I (Dublin, 1996) Introduction p.8
- (9) Jacqueline O' Brien and Desmond Guinness, Great Irish Houses And Castles (London,1992) p.112
- (10) Klaus-Hartmut Olbricht and Helga M. Wegener, Irish Houses History, Architecture And Furnishings (Dublin, 1984)
- (11) M.D Evans, Aspects Of Irish Genealogy II (Dublin,1996) p.141
- (12) John Cornforth, 'Abbeyleix Co. Leix, Ireland: The seat of viscount de Vesci', Country Life 26 Sept. 1991
- (13) Samuel Lewis, Topographical Dictionary of Ireland Vol.1 (London, 1846) p.4
- (14) M. D. Evans, Aspects Of Irish Genealogy II (Dublin, 1996) p.141
- (15) Desmond Guinness and William Ryan, Irish Houses And Castles (London, 1971) p.226
- (16) J.N Brewer Esq., The Beauties Of Ireland; being original delineations, topographical, historical, and biographical, of each county. Vol.II (London,1826) p.126

- (17) M.D. Evans, Aspects Of Irish Genealogy II (Dublin, 1996) pp. 143-146
- (18) Sir Charles Coote, Queen's County Statistical Survey (Dublin, 1801) p.61
- (19) Alan Sutton, The Complete Peerage Vol. II (London, 1982)
- (20) Alan Sutton, The Complete Peerage Vol 2 (Great Britain, 1982) p.307
- (21) Obituary for the second viscount in The Leinster Express Sat. 27 Oct.1855
- (22) Patrick F. Meehan, 'More Famous Laoismen', Laois Association Yearbook 1986 (Dublin,1986) p.28
- (23) Notice issued by de Vesci to Queens County tenantry regarding relief of rent, 30 Oct. 1846 (N.L.I., de Vesci papers, MS P.6801)
- (24) J.N Brewer, The Beauties Of Ireland; being original deliniations, topographical, historical, and biographical, of each County. Vol. 2 (London, 1826) p. 126
- (25) Samuel Lewis, Topographical Dictionary Of Ireland Vol. 1 (London, 1846) p.4
- (26) *ibid.*
- (27) W.E Vaughan, Landlords and Tenants In Mid Victorian Ireland (New York, 1994) p.119
- (28) Philomena Sheeran, 'Pestalozzian Influences In Abbeyleix Schools', Laois Association Yearbook 1986 (Dublin, 1986) P.15
- (29) J.N Brewer, The Beauties Of Ireland; being original delineations, topographical, historical, and biographical, of each County. Vol. 2 (London, 1826) p.126
- (30) Philomena Sheeran, 'Pestalozzian Influences In Abbeyleix schools', Laois Association Yearbook 1986 (Dublin, 1986) P.14
- (31) *ibid.*
- (32) Kate Silber, Pestalozzi: The Man And His Work (Great Britain, 1976) p.292
- (33) *ibid.*

(34) *ibid.*

(35) Notice concerning the local Abbeyleix [Pestalozzian] institution, 1 July 1820 (N.L.I., de Vesci papers, MS L8)

(36) *ibid.*

(37) *ibid.*

(38) Philomena Sheeran, 'Pestalozzian influences in Abbeyleix schools', Laois Association Yearbook 1986 (Dublin, 1986) p.15

(39) *ibid.*, p.16

(40) Notice concerning the local Abbeyleix [Pestalozzian] institution, 1 July 1820 (N.L.I., de Vesci papers, MS L8)

(41) Commissioners of Irish Education Inquiry, Second Report, 1826-27, Vol. XII, pt. 1 pp 750-751

(42) *ibid.*

(43) *ibid.*

(44) Rev. Martin Brenan, Schools of Kildare and Leighlin (Dublin, 1935) p.371

(45) Philomena Sheeran, ' Pestalozzian influences in Abbeyleix schools', Laois Association Yearbook 1986 (Dublin ,1986) p.17

(46) Kate Silber, Pestalozzi: The Man And His Work (Great Britain, 1976) p. 187

(47) Alan Sutton, The Complete Peerage Vol. II (Great Britain,1992) p.307

(48) Obituary for the second viscount in The Leinster Express Sat. 27 Oct. 1855

(49) The Dublin Builder 1 July 1860 Vol.II no.19 p.298

(50) *ibid.*

(51) *ibid.*

(52) J.N Brewer, The Beauties Of Ireland: being original delineations,
topographical, historical, and biographical, of each County. Vol.II (London, 1826)
p. 125

Chapter 3.

The history of eighteenth century Abbeyleix and of the nearby landed estate is very much dominated by the work of generations of the local landowning family of the de Vesce. The nineteenth century, saw a continuation of this trend, and during this period a crucial factor in the development of the estate and town was its continued association with the de Vescis. Thomas Vesey and his wife, Emma, the third viscount and viscountess de Vesce were no different from their ancestors in that they had an interest in local society and a willingness to participate in its development. Their history contains strands of progressive management of an estate coupled with the administration of local affairs. Such then, is the purpose of this chapter; to examine aspects of their history and to record the influence they had on the local physical, social and political environment from 1803 - 1884.

Thomas Vesey, the son of John the second viscount and his wife Frances Laetitia, was born on the 21 September 1803. Educated at Eton and Christ Church, Oxford, he graduated with a B.A. degree in 1825. In 1839 at the age of thirty-six he married Lady Emma Herbert, the grand-daughter of Count Simon Woronzow, Russian Ambassador to the court of Saint James during the Napoleonic era. Catherine, his daughter, had married the eleventh Earl of Pembroke and it was their daughter Emma who, at the age of twenty, became Lady Emma Vesey. (1)

Succeeding his father as third viscount in 1855, Thomas her husband, was an active participant in the local affairs of Queen's County. Apart from his role as M.P. and Lord Lieutenant of Queen's County he was among other things captain of the Abbeyleix corps of Yeomanry, sheriff of Queen's County, chairperson of Gully Drainage Board, chairman of the Abbeyleix Poor Law Union, foreman of the grand jury, Queen's County, and commissioner of the peace. On a more national level, his role was one of representative peer for Ireland in the British house of Commons. Thomas first became a prominent figure in the politics of Queen's County in 1835, when he was elected Conservative M.P. for the county. In 1832 he had assisted Sir Charles Coote, also a Conservative disciple, with his campaign. In a letter dated 26 December of that year Coote wrote:

'My dear Vesey,

after all our labour a little amusement will not be a bad thing. I therefore propose shooting these woods.....I trust we shall have good sport. I must express to Lord de Vesci how much obliged I feel for the support I received from him.....'(2)

In January 1833, a month later, de Vesci received a letter from [Sir] Joseph Copley, who wrote 'I am sorry for my sake that you did not stand for the county as you seem to have been so sure of success.' (3) By 1835, however, de Vesci was set to contest the election. Queen's County at the time was represented by Sir Charles Coote in the Conservative interest and by Mr. Pat Lalor who represented the interests of the Liberals. In the election campaign of 1835 the Liberals undertook to propose a second candidate to run alongside Mr. Lalor, yet

agreement could not be reached among them as to whether Mr. Robert Cassidy or Mr. Peter Gale was the best candidate to go forward. The Queen's County Conservatives saw their opportunity and nominated Sir Thomas Vesey to stand alongside Sir Charles Coote as a candidate in the Conservative interest. In his address to the electors, de Vesci stated that he came forward in obedience to the wish of the Conservatives, merely assuring the electors he would 'endeavour to promote the welfare of Ireland, and to support every sound measure which might be brought forward to maintain, increase and secure the prosperity, tranquillity and improvement of our common county in general, and of the Queen's County in particular.'⁽⁴⁾ The result of the election was a victory for both of the Conservative candidates, Sir Charles Coote topping the poll with 787 votes, Mr. Vesey next with 695 while Mr. Pat Lalor and Mr. Cassidy got 673 and 637 votes each respectively.⁽⁵⁾ Lord de Vesci held his seat for two years until 1837 when he lost by 22 votes to the Liberal candidate J. W. Fitzpatrick, (Lord Castletown). He remained without a seat until 1842 when he was elected once again, this time enjoying undisturbed possession of his seat until 1852 when he retired.

During his career as M.P. for Queen's County he supported the removal of the tithes, opposed Lord John Russell's corporation reform Bill, sought to amend the Poor Law Bill, the Grand Jury Bill and the Loan Funds Bill. He supported Sir Robert Peel's attempts at preventing fluctuations in the price of corn but voted against the total repeal of the Corn Laws. He did support, however, a measure introduced by Lord Lincoln which embraced principles of compensation for

improvements by occupiers. He favoured a repeal of the Union but argued that reforms of parliament were necessary before a repeal could be achieved and so he did not support Daniel O'Connell or his party. He was also in favour of Home Rule and his last public act was to nominate General Francis Plunkett Dunne as the Conservative Home Rule candidate in the 1874 election. (6) He was firmly in opposition to fixity of tenure and had clearly the courage of his opinions stating that 'I not only cannot promise it my support, but that I shall give it my most decided opposition'.(7) He added, however, that 'whenever any measure calculated to ameliorate the relations of landlord and tenant are brought forward I shall be ready to give them my fullest consideration.'(8) Outside his role as M.P. he, like his father, served as Lord Lieutenant of Queen's County. In 1857 he was elected a representative peer for Ireland at Westminster. However, despite his colourful political career, Thomas Vesey 'was better known as a resident landlord - a country gentleman who took an active and useful part in the local affairs of the Queen's County - than as a politician'.(9)

In spite of his political involvement, Lord Vesey was also a conscientious Irish landlord who had a genuine interest in improvement. By the time of his death in 1875 the extent of the estate was in the region of 15,000 acres (10), much of which displayed the hallmarks of progressive management. A substantial amount of his improvement was in the form of drainage schemes which were undertaken on the estate. In expending capital on such schemes in the years 1870-75 Lord de Vesey was investing in the most profitable kind of improvement. In the late 1860s

he, along with the Right Honorable John Wilson Fitzpatrick M.P., Robert Hamilton Stubber Esq., and Peter Roe Esq. in accordance with the Drainage and improvement of land Act (Ireland) 1863 presented a petition to her majesty's commissioners of public works in Ireland, requesting that the district they had outlined on maps be incorporated under the style and name of the 'Gully Drainage District'. They also called for an inspector to be sent to the district to inquire into the appropriateness of enacting this.(11) On 24 April 1869 the Commissioners of Public Works made a provisional order constituting this separate drainage district.(12) A Gully Drainage Board was soon established with de Vesci as its chairman. (13) A loan of £4,340 (14) was originally granted to the Board from the public loan fund Ireland and by 1 April 1871 a further £1,000 was requested in addition to this sum. By 4 October 1873 the works necessary for the drainage and improvements of the lands within the Gully District had been completed. The cost, which by the time of completion, amounted to £4,570 11s. 6d. was to be apportioned amongst and charged upon the respective proprietors of the district, and on their lands respectively, according to the proportion of land they had drained or improved. De Vesci drainage and improvement under this scheme was concentrated in the townlands of Boley, Clonohill and Derrylahan all in the Barony of Cullenagh, Queen's County. In Boley the area of lands drained or improved, statute measure, was one hundred and six acres, in Clonohill, one hundred and forty one acres and in Derrylahan, one hundred and five acres. The

proportion of the total cost of the scheme charged to de Vesci and covering the cost of the drainage and improvement of his lands amounted to £1,546 8s. 5d.(16)

The drainage of the river Gully appears to have been a main preoccupation of Thomas Vesey, yet drainage elsewhere on the estate, apart from the river Gully, was also undertaken. Two sketches which provide evidence of this survive. The first which is undated reads 'this sketch represents the drainage done and to be done on Mr. Wilkinsons farm Colt adjoining the railway line'. (17) The second which is marked Colt and dated 26 September 1874 states that 'this drainage section represents the field to be drained all in the one field at the top of the cottage gardens between seven or eight acres Irish'.(18) Both sketches are signed J. Borrows who was employed by de Vesci as the drainer on the estate. On 6 August 1874 this Mr. Borrows was prompted to write to Colonel Fred. Bull, the estate agent, stating that 'as Lord de Vesci would require my services on his estate continually on drainage, building and other improvements I would wish to be employed by the year or half year'.(19) Although this letter shows that Borrows was employed only on a part time basis, on the whole however, even this in itself is an indication of the progressive outlook of de Vesci. In addition, although it is difficult to establish the total area of lands improved on the estate, by comparison with many other landlords of the time, de Vesci seems to have been relatively liberal. Cormac O Grada has suggested that landlords rather than tenants were responsible for most of the permanent drainage that went on in Ireland between 1850-75 and that most of the drainage was carried out with the help of money

which the landlords borrowed from the Board of Works.(20) This was certainly the case on the Abbeyleix estate where the landlord was generally responsible for any drainage improvements made. Lord Templeton drained lands using money borrowed from the Board of public works, and charged the expense to the tenants in the rent.(21) Similarly at Abbeyleix, any increase in the profitable capacity of lands rented inevitably meant a rise in rent levels for tenants. An undated application form to be filled by parties seeking to increase rents on lands improved by drainage - listing the names of four tenants - survives among the third Viscount de Vesci papers and is evidence that this was certainly the case on the Abbeyleix Estate.(22)

Improvements other than agricultural were also undertaken during this period. The beautifying of the Abbeyleix demesne became a main concern of the third viscountess de Vesci, who was responsible for the additions to the house and for the design of the terraced gardens in 1859 and 1860. In March 1859 Lord de Vesci wrote to T. H. Wyatt asking for a second set of plans of the improvements for his wife 'that she can keep as she looks at them from morning to night. They are too tantalising and make us inclined more than prudence would dictate'. He added 'that we have quite decided on adopting your plan for ornamenting the outside of the house'.(23) A further storey of staff accommodation was added into the roof cavity of the house with a balustraded parapet around the roof to disguise the new dormer windows. The walls were refaced in portland cement, the window architraves were enriched with heavy blocking around the ground level

windows, shouldered surrounds to those of the first floor and three balconies were erected to emphasize the central windows of both the front and back of the house.(24) Outside the house extra work was executed by George Pratt to the stable yard buildings and other offices.(25) Perhaps most notable of all, however, was the formation of the formal terraced flower garden, the design of which was based upon that of Count Woronzow's palace in the Crimea. Improvements of this kind, however, were of little use to tenants on the estate and benefited the de Vescis alone, yet despite living in an ascendancy's world Lord and Lady de Vesci never became oblivious to the harsh realities outside their demesne. 'The neat cottages for labourers on his estate are a proof of his regard for the comfort of the humbler classes, and his fostering care is made apparent in the town of Abbeyleix. We venture to say that no deserving tenant on his estate, who wanted a helping hand, ever sought his assistance in vain'. (26) Many of these tenants, among other things sought and received assistance from him, in their emigration attempts to North America and Australia.

Private benefaction was often a central feature of local emigration. By investing in emigration landlords hoped to clear estates and, thus, curtail subdivision and promote consolidation of holdings. Most donors, however, believed that clearances softened by assisted emigration benefited the recipients as much as it did themselves. Furthermore, many landlords received more applications for assistance than they could handle or satisfy. After 1845 most of

the recorded private assistance in Ireland was administered by ten proprietors which included de Vesci. Each of these proprietors aided between 1,000 and 7,000 emigrants each. These benefactors were, in descending order of investment, the fifth earl Fitzwilliam, Coolattin estate, Co. Wicklow; Charles Wandesforde, Castlecomer, Co. Kilkenny; the third marquis of Lansdowne, Kenmare, Co. Kerry; the fourth marquis of Bath, Farney, Co. Monaghan; the third viscount Palmerston, Cliffony, Co. Sligo; Col. George Wyndham, Tulla, Co. Clare; Sir Robert Gore-Booth, Lissadell, Co. Sligo; Francis Spaight, Derry, Co. Tipperary; the third viscount de Vesci, Abbeyleix, Queen's County and finally major Denis Mahon, Strokestown, Co. Roscommon.(27) It was usual for such landlords to provide, clothing, provisions and landing money, to help emigrants in their passage, and this was certainly the case for those who received assistance under the de Vesci emigration scheme.(28)

Thomas Vesey always showed a willingness to invest in the development and improvement of local social and economic life. Some idea as to the variety of improvements made on Irish estates can be gleaned from the Erne accounts where the landlord for the County Fermanagh estate gave money for, among other things, street lamps in Lisnaskea.(29) In 1870 de Vesci, too, showed an active interest in the erection of public lamps in the town of Abbeyleix and in a letter to him dated 18 January 1870 W. J. Morrissey on behalf of the Public Lights Committee expresses his thanks for a generous contribution of £35 donated by de Vesci towards the costs. (30) By the end of 1871 he had become actively involved in an

effort to have monthly fairs held at Abbeyleix, an effort which was eventually successful.(31) He assisted the Abbeyleix band formed 31 May 1872 in obtaining their instruments (32) and provided rooms for the Abbeyleix Young Men's Christian Association to hold their meetings in.(33)

Emma Vesey was no different from her husband in that she too played an active role in the locality in which she was resident. During her lifetime she appears to have been particularly preoccupied with efforts to alleviate the distress felt by impoverished women in the locality. Samuel Lewis's Topographical Dictionary of Ireland (London, 1846) tells us that she maintained 'an almshouse for poor widows', yet we know nothing more of this specific foundation.(34) In May 1865 the new Church of Ireland church which she built in honour of her mother, the Countess of Pembroke, was consecrated. (35) Two decades earlier, in 1845, she had established a local organisation called the Abbeyleix Baby Linen Society. This society provided assistance to pregnant women, not above the class of labourers wives, who had good characters and had lived on the estate for more than ten years. It also gave assistance to those who were not de Vescis immediate tenants, once they were recommended either by the person they lived under or by a respectable person in the neighbourhood. Each woman requiring assistance from this society had to deposit one shilling and six pence before her confinement and on the day of childbirth the sum deposited was doubled to purchase oatmeal, sugar, soap and candles to be given to the woman in question. On the day the one shilling and six pence was originally deposited the woman received on loan, a bag

containing a suit of baby clothes, two pairs of sheets, two shifts, two bed gowns, two night caps and other items. If these items were returned, six weeks later to the day, clean and intact, those women who were Lord de Vesci's immediate tenants were given a suit of baby clothes. (36) This particular organisation can certainly be classified among the most rare and imaginative ever established by a landlord or his wife. Infact, I have found no evidence to suggest that there was any similar scheme like it, in operation in Ireland at this time. The account book for this society survives and gives valuable details of many hundreds of women who availed of assistance from the society between 1845 and 1922. (37) It portrays the third viscountess as somewhat of a philanthropist and reveals also, just one of the numerous points at which Lord and Lady de Vesci touched the affairs of the local community.

The nineteenth century had brought with it serious economic and social problems with which even the most sympathetic of landlords could not adequately deal. Landlords, however, in general became the obvious scapegoats for many of these problems; the famine disaster of the 1840s further reinforcing this opinion. The widely accepted and generalised view became one of an alien landlord, yet this seems not to have been the case in Abbeyleix. Both Thomas and Emma Vesey appear to have been aware of their obligations towards local society and were sympathetic towards the problems of their tenants. Their role had been in part political, in part economic and in part social, concerning themselves primarily with the administration of local affairs and with the embellishment of the estate and

town. Lord de Vesci's uniform kindness to those who were dependent on him, and the impartiality with which he discharged his public duties were not to be equaled by many others who held such positions of high estate.

'It is proof that what ever antagonism his political opinions may have excited at the time- whatever bitterness his victories over the popular party of the day may have been calculated to arouse, they were outweighed by his many acts of kindness to his tenantry, and by the uprightness and diligence with which he discharged the duties devolving upon those who are placed in high estate.' (38)

He died on 23 December 1875, aged 72, and was buried in the mausoleum on the estate. Several thousand people gathered for the funeral including about five hundred tenants who, wearing scarves, preceded the hearse, the latter, however, not being used as the tenants carried the coffin on a bier.(39) In 1878 a memorial fountain, similar in idea though not in structure to that of his fathers, was erected in the town in his memory. On the memorial designed by Mr. Rawson Carroll and built at a cost of about £330 are inscribed the following words, 'In memory of Thomas, third viscount de Vesci. This fountain is erected by a grateful tenantry A.D 1878'.(40) His widow, Emma, died 10 October 1884, aged 65, but their son John Robert, fourth viscount de Vesci was to continue in the footsteps of his ancestors.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) Alan Sutton, The complete peerage of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain and The United Kingdom vol ii pp 307-308 (Great Britain,1982).
- (2) Coote to de Vesci, 26 December 1832 (N.L.I., de Vesci Papers, MS M73).
- (3) Copley to de Vesci, Jan. 1833 (N.L.I., de Vesci Papers, MS M22).
- (4) Obituary for the third viscount de Vesci in The Leinster Express, Sat. 1 Jan. 1876.
- (5) *ibid.*
- (6) Patrick Meehan, The members of parliament for Laois and offaly 1801-1918 pp 42-43 (Portlaoise, 1972).
- (7) Obituary for the third viscount in The Leinster Express, Sat. 1 Jan. 1876.
- (8) *ibid.*
- (9) *ibid.*
- (10) Landowners in Ireland 1876 p.75
- (11) Notice from Robert P. Hamilton, 28 May 1868 (N.L.I., de Vesci Papers. MS M105).
- (12) Document from E. Hornsby Secretary, n.d. (N.L.I., de Vesci Papers, MS M105).
- (13) Notice from de Vesci to electors for members of the Gully Drainage Board, 8 Aug. 1873 (N.L.I., de Vesci papers, MS M105).

- (14) Office of Public Works to de Vesci, 15 Feb. 1872 (N.L.I., de Vesci Papers, MS M105).
- (15) Hamilton to Commissioners of Public Works, 1 April 1871 (N.L.I., de Vesci Papers MS M105).
- (16) Document from E. Hornsby Secretary, n.d. (N.L.I., de Vesci Papers, MS M105).
- (17) Sketch by J. Burrows, n.d. (N.L.I., de Vesci papers, MS M106).
- (18) Sketch by J. Burrows, marked colt, 26 Sept. 1874 (N.L.I., de Vesci Papers, MS M106).
- (19) Mr. Burrows to Colonel Bull, 6 Aug. 1874 (N.L.I., de Vesci Papers, MS M106).
- (20) Cormac O Grada, 'The investment behaviour of Irish landlords 1850-75', Agricultural History Review 1975 Vol. 23 pt. II pp. 144-146.
- (21) *ibid.*, p.146
- (22) Application form for increase in rent, n.d. (N.L.I., de Vesci Papers, MS M106).
- (23) John Cornforth, 'Abbeyleix, Co. Leix, Ireland: The seat of viscount de Vesci', Country Life 26 Sept. 1991.
- (24) J. O'Brien & D. Guinness, Great Irish Houses and Castles (London, 1992).
- (25) George Pratt to de Vesci, 1859 (N.L.I., de Vesci Papers, MS M102).
- (26) Obituary for the third vicount de Vesci in The Leinster Express Sat. 1 Jan. 1876.

- (27) W.E Vaughan, A New History Of Ireland Ireland under the Union 1801-1870
Vol. V (New York, 1987) p.593
- (28) Correspondence re assistance to tenants emigrating to N. America and
Australia, 1862-68 (N.L.I., de Vesci Papers, MS M104)
- (29) W.E Vaughan, Landlords and Tenants in Mid Victorian Ireland (New York,
1994) p.121
- (30) Morrissey to de Vesci, 18 Jan. 1870 (N.L.I., de Vesci Papers, MS M118).
- (31) Minutes of meeting, 2 Dec. 1871 (N.L.I., de Vesci Papers, MS M118).
- (32) Committee of Abbeyleix band to de Vesci, n.d.(N.L.I., de Vesci Papers, MS
M118).
- (33) Abbeyleix Young Men's Christian Association to de Vesci, n.d. (N.L.I., de
Vesci Papers, MS H1-18).
- (34) Samuel Lewis, Topographical Dictionary of Ireland Vol. 1 (London, 1846) p.4
- (35) New church of Abbeyleix (The Dublin Builder, vol. vii, no. 130, p.131, 15
May 1865).
- (36) Notice from Lady Emma Vesey, n.d.(N.L.I., de Vesci Papers, MS M118).
- (37) Account book for Abbeyleix Baby Linen Society, 18 Dec. 1845 - 29 April
1922 (N.L.I., de Vesci Papers, MS P110).
- (38) Obituary for the third viscount de Vesci in The Leinster Express, Sat. 1 Jan.
1876.
- (39) *ibid.*

(40) ' De Vesci memorial fountain Abbeyleix,' The Irish Builder 15 Sept. 1877

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Conclusion.

This work has set out to document the history of Abbeyleix from 1698 to 1884 and has argued that a crucial factor in the development of Abbeyleix, during this period, was its association with the de Vesci landowning family. The picture I have painted, throughout, indicates that Abbeyleix and its inhabitants were somewhat fortunate to have had the vision and encouragement of this fascinating family. Responsible for designing, building and developing the town, they were also, key players in maintaining its vibrant social fabric.

Abbeyleix in the early 1800s may be described as a town in the mid passage of its development. In the second half of the eighteenth century the old town which was ‘ little more than a collection of thatched houses’ (1) was taken down and the foundations of a new town laid. A notable development of this period, of course, was the building in the 1770s of Abbeyleix House. The succeeding decades saw the embellishment of the estate and town. Much energy went into building schools and considerable progress was made in establishing the foundations of a more liberal educational process. The nineteenth century saw improvements in agriculture and patronage of various kinds was vested in the de Vescis. The estate and town was further developed and this coincided with the philanthropic efforts of the third viscountess, personified in the Abbeyleix Baby Linen Society.

The account of the progress of Abbeyleix to 1884 indicates consistent effort on the part of many hands. That the de Vescis achieved something of an ideal, through consistent effort, is hinted at in a manuscript supplement to Grose’s

Antiquities of Ireland. According to this supplement written in about 1805, ' This noble domain and highly improved estate is a striking example of what might be done in this country, if the noblemen and landholders would reside on their property, or by frequent visits make themselves acquainted with their tenantry, and by adequate encouragement render it worth their trouble to take care of the farms they occupy, to make improvements in agriculture, keep neat and comfortable dwellings, and to promote good conduct and cleanliness in their families..... On this estate manufactories have been established, encouragement given to the tenantry, neat farm houses in the English style, present themselves on every side, and improved agriculture cheers the face of the country'(2) This progressive outlook and humanitarian attitude highlighted in the above passage did not just evaporate after 1884. John Robert , fourth viscount de Vesci, continued in the tradition of his ancestors. He gave the site for and built the church of the Holy Rosary in Abbeyleix. He was a close friend of Gladstone, the latter having stayed with de Vesci on holidays in Abbeyleix.(3) Ivo Richard, fifth viscount de Vesci established in 1904 the once world famous, but now almost forgotten, Carpet factory in Abbeyleix. This factory provided much employment locally and supplied floor coverings to clubs and big houses in Ireland, England, Europe and the United States. Its carpets also adorned the ill-fated Titanic, and sister ship the Olympic.(4) The sixth viscount, the first catholic viscount, took a great interest in the welfare of his native Abbeyleix and was also a large employer of labour. He died on 13

October 1983 and was succeeded by his son, Thomas, the present and seventh viscount de Vesci, who retains some of the former estate lands at Abbeyleix.

Today, much remains in Abbeyleix , of the world the de Vescis helped to create. Between 1698-1884 they proved themselves to be both progressive and humanitarian landlords, and although, one might suggest that they could have done more, it is worth remembering that they did in effect, much more than most others placed in similar situations of high estate.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) James Fleming, 'Historic Irish Mansions no. 58: Abbeyleix House Co. Leix viscount Vescis Residence' in The Weekly Irish Times Saturday 12 June 1937
- (2) Manuscript Supplement to Grose's Antiquities of Ireland belonging to Lord Rossmore referred to in John Cornforth's article 'Abbeyleix, Co. Leix, Ireland, the seat of viscount de Vesci' A Country Life 26 Sept. 1991
- (3) Patrick F. Meehan, 'More Famous Laois Men', Laois Association Yearbook 1996 (Dublin, 1996)
- (4) The Leinster Express 19 April 1997
- (5) Patrick F. Meehan, 'More Famous Laois Men', Laois Association Yearbook 1996 (Dublin, 1996)

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