

Hidden Gems and Forgotten People

BY BRIAN McCABE



PARK HOTEL (FORMER SHOOTING LODGE)

Just outside Virginia (on the left-hand side of the Ballyjamesduff Road) lies the Park Hotel. It is one of Virginia's 'Hidden Gems', with a very interesting history.

It was built, in the mid 18th century, by Thomas Taylor, First Earl of Bective, reputedly as a hunting lodge for the family's vast estates which, at the time, comprised large areas of counties Meath and Cavan. The lodge may have coincided with, or taken place shortly after, the construction of Headfort House, Kells, the principal residence of the family. This house is the only significant work of the famous architect, Robert Adams, to survive in Ireland and a fireplace in the dining room of the lodge (now hotel) has been attributed to him.

The lodge was constructed on an elevated site overlooking Lough Ramor and its layout, with parkland running down to the lake followed the classic eighteenth century plan 'looking out from the house to the landscape and capturing nature as its view'. Taylor furnished his new lodge lavishly with the best silver, chinaware, furnishings and furniture.

It is described as a 'cottage' in the first Ordnance Survey map of 1836 but, in the 1878 version, it is shown as a 'lodge'. It was added to by the second Earl (also Thomas Taylor) who was a keen tree planter, who imported many exotic shrubs and trees from distant countries, including China and Japan. Many of the trees and shrubs that surround the building date from this period. He also added a forest, a Deer Park and a peasantry to the grounds and a rustic 'Lady's Cottage' was also constructed near the lake.

The lodge would have been the scene of many galas and parties when regattas were held on the lake in summer and shooting parties took place in the grounds in the autumn time. Older residents of the town remember these grand shooting parties being held in the first half of the twentieth century.