

Irish Manor Houses

Before the Industrial Revolution most wealth came from the land. As a rule the most substantial house in a medieval village belonged to the lord of the manor. This was the manor house. Nearby would be stables, a barn, and other farm buildings. Often it was surrounded by a perimeter wall with a gatehouse, and a long driveway leading to the manor. On the otherhand a castle would have been built by a baron or earl. Such a man owned many manors, often in several counties.

Most wealth came from the land in the form of rents. The tenant farmer was required to pay a certain part of his harvest as rent. In Ireland, many landlords appointed middlemen or agents to collect the rent. These rents were established by the landlords agents, who were free to raise the rent as they saw fit, or what the market could bear. As the population of Ireland increased, so did the demand for suitable farm land and so did the amount of rents. Any improvements to the holding became a part of the land and with each eviction the rent was increased in proportion to the improvements left behind. This was a very insecure time for the Irish tenant, as each time a farmer left, by eviction or any other method the middleman received a financial benefit.

The tenant farmer in Ireland

The Dissolution was a bonanza both for the established aristocracy and Tudor new men hungry for lands. Monasteries could be converted into country houses.

By the 18th century a castle might be transformed into a grand country house, while the family could have a town house in London, Dublin or Edinburgh. Those seeking royal favour or a part in government needed to live part of the year away from their country estates. The more modest country squire looked after his acres, played a part in local government, and improved his manor house as finances permitted..

As the fortunes of industrial magnates and the merchant classes began to eclipse wealth from land, some country estates were sold to another generation of *nouveau riches*, or maintained by marriages to merchant heiresses.

But as taxation levels and wage bills rose over the first half of the 20th century, many of the grandest country houses became white elephants. Some were demolished. Others have been preserved by opening them to the public, granting them to the National Trust or converting them into hotels.

Landed gentry is a traditional British social class consisting of "gentlemen" in the original sense; that is, those who owned land in the form of country estates to such an extent that they were not required to actively work, except in an administrative capacity on their own lands. The estates were often made up of tenanted farms, in which case the gentleman could live entirely off rent income.

The designation originally referred exclusively to commoners in such a position,. The famous book series *Burke's Landed Gentry* recorded the members of this class.

The primary meaning of "landed gentry" encompassed those members of the landowning classes who were not members of the peerage. It was an informal designation: one belonged to the landed gentry if other members of the class accepted that one did so. Up until at least the early 19th century, a newly rich man who wished his family to join the gentry (and they nearly all did so wish), was expected not only to buy a country house and estate, but also to sever all financial ties with the business which had made him wealthy in order to cleanse his family of the "taint of trade". However, during the 19th century, as the new rich of the Industrial Revolution became more and more numerous and politically powerful, this expectation was gradually relaxed.

Members of the landed gentry were upper class (not middle class), and, at the time, this was a highly desirable status. Particular prestige was attached to those who had inherited landed estates over a number of generations.

The agricultural sector's middle class, on the other hand, comprised the larger tenant farmers, who rented land from the landowners and employed agricultural labourers to do the manual work, and yeoman farmers. A "yeoman" was at one time defined as "a person qualified by possessing free land of 40/- annual [feudal] value, and who can serve on juries and vote for a Knight of the Shire. He is sometimes described as a small landowner, a farmer of the middle classes." [1] Anthony Richard Wagner, *Richmond Herald*, wrote that "a Yeoman would not normally have less than 100 acres" and in social status is one step down from the gentry, but above, say, a husbandman. [