

Irish Manor Houses

The Dissolution of the Monasteries, between 1536 and 1541 by which Henry VIII disbanded monasteries, priories, convents and friaries was a massive reapportionment of wealth to the established aristocracy and Tudor new men hungry for lands. Monasteries could be converted into country houses. By the beginning of the 16th century, manor-houses began to acquire the character and amenities of the residences of country gentlemen.

Landed gentry is a traditional British social class consisting of "gentlemen" 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. 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.

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. Alternatively, a castle would have been built by a baron or earl. Such a man owned many manors, often in several counties.

By the early 1700's most of the land was in the hand of English landlords, many of whom held vast tracts. The majority of the landlords let the land to tenant farmers who had few rights. 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 often needed more help with the daily needs on his farm. He could employ the services of a cottier. A cottier was a farm laborer who got the use of about a half acre. On this, he could build a mud cabin and grow enough potatoes to feed his family. He would pay the tenant farmer, an agreed amount and work off this amount through the year. Con-acer was another devise used to acquire a small plot. In this case the land was let for a single season, usually one year, and for one specific purpose the taking of a single crop of potatoes, corn or grazing. It was a form of subletting used by landowners and farmers to rent to those who had insufficient or no land of their own to secure the basic food supply needed for their families to survive. This class comprised between thirty and thirty-five percent of the total number of tenants in rural areas. Con-acre was also used by small farmers as a means of wage payment in lieu of cash and by resident landlords as a source for a cheap labor force. Most towns held twice yearly hiring fairs, at these laborer's were hired to work on farms. A man could expect to receive about £5 per year, in many cases this amounted to little more than slave labor, being expected to work from dawn till dusk. Another group of laborer's were the 'spalpeens' these were men who traveled the country looking for work, they were well paid at harvest time. During the rest of the year had little employment, so they were the worst off of all.

The Manor House was the dwelling house, not typically built with strong fortifications as castles were, many manor-houses were partly fortified. They were enclosed within walls or ditches that often included the farm buildings as well. Arranged for de fence against robbers and thieves, it was often equipped with small gatehouses and watchtowers. The primary feature of the manor-house was its great hall, as a great deal of entertaining was conducted on their lavish estates. 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. Many grand manor houses were built on large estates supported by the rent collected from tenants on that estate. Marriages between families of the "Landed Gentry" led to larger estates by combining two or more estates. The more modest country squire looked after his acres, played a part in local government, and improved his manor house as finances permitted.

During the famine many of Ireland's great manor homes accumulated huge debt trying to survive those horrible days. Tenants became desperate and unable to support the lavish lifestyle to which the Lord of the Manor had been accustomed. Some landlords tried in vain to offer some meager assistance but the number of tenants, desperate for

assistance, far exceeded what they could offer. Some landlords tried as they could, while others turned their heads. Their debts mounted and many were abandoned. Many of the grandest country houses became fell into disuse and disrepair. Some were demolished. Others have been preserved by opening them to the public, granting them to the National Trust or converting them into hotels.

Westport House in Co. Mayo was one house that felt for their tenants plight, borrowing money to import foods for the starving tenants. But even they were unable to support the demand for the conditions that existed. Newcastle House in Co. Longford was another where the KingHarman family offered assistance to those who chose to emigrate paying for part or the entire passage.