

# **A Colony of Strangers**

The founding & early history of Clifden

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## Chapter 1

# Slow Beginnings

It is difficult to know when the notion of building a town on his Connemara estate first came to John D'Arcy. It may have germinated over years as it became clear that his cousin Patrick, the owner of the family estates, was not likely to produce an heir and that he was, therefore, next in line to inherit. There is also the possibility that his father and grandfather before him had similar thoughts for this particular D'Arcy estate. Both men had married Connemara women and this would have kept the family interests focused on Connemara.

John's father, Hyacinth, married Julia Lynch, daughter of Marcus Lynch of Barna. John's grandfather, also named John, married Catherine Lynch in 1752. Catherine was the daughter of Colonel Isidore Lynch of Drimcong, Moycullen. Over time, debate and discussion may well have developed among the elder family members as to how best to derive an income from this particular portion of the D'Arcy inheritance. At the time the D'Arcy estates were in the possession of another branch of the family, from whom John's grandfather held over 4,800 acres of the Connemara estate on a thirty-one year lease, dated 1774. The townlands held by John's grandfather included Cloghally, where the town of Clifden would later emerge.<sup>1</sup>

In choosing a site for a town, the necessary fundamentals were fresh water and easy access; the ideal location, therefore, would be a site at the mouth of a river in a deep harbour. The only suitable harbour on John D'Arcy's Connemara estate was Ardbear Harbour and the only river of any consequence was the Owenglin River. John chose Cloghally, situated at the head of the bay, as the site for his town. The terrain was hilly, but not too steep, and it is here that the Owenglin River entered the sea. The road from Galway bridged the river at a waterfall, named locally as the Halling Hole, or Basket Hole waterfall. To the east of the waterfall were the stepping-stones that formed a crossing point in earlier times. Surveyors working for the Ordnance Survey in 1839 date the bridge as 1789 and give a construction cost of about £100. They describe the bridge as being 90 feet long, 12 feet high and having two arches.<sup>2</sup> It was later altered to a three-arched bridge with an overflow cut on the Ardbear side.



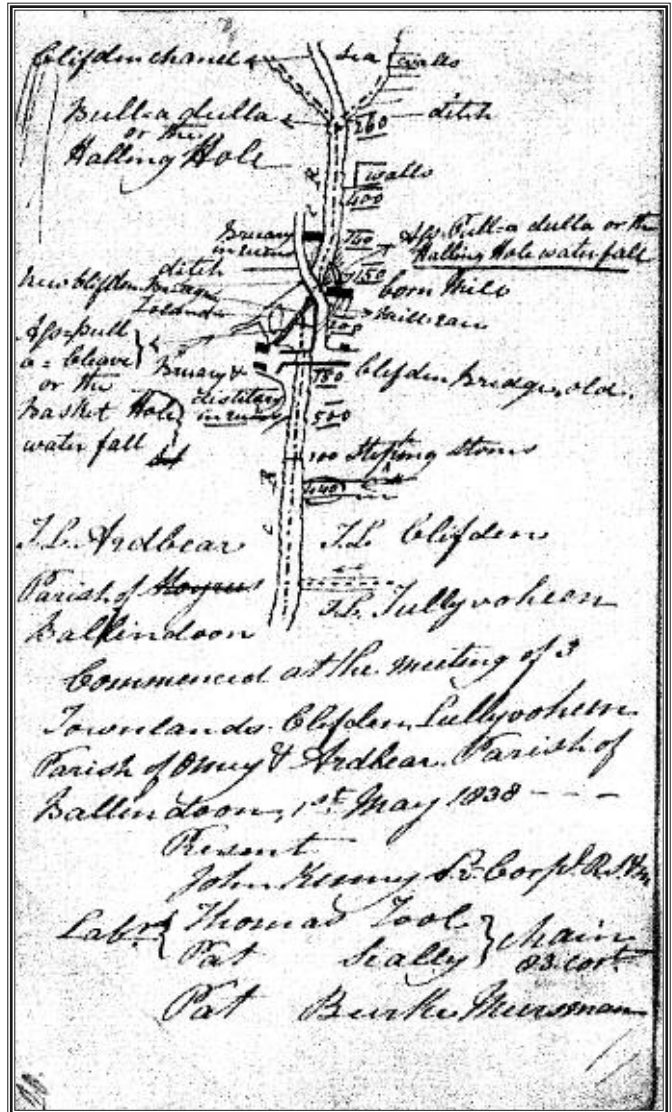
**John D'Arcy (1785–1839)**



Courtesy of Adrian Lead

## A Colony of Strangers

The river formed a natural boundary between the townlands of Ardbear and Cloghally, and was a freshwater source for the town and the waterfall had the potential to be harnessed to produce power for mills and other industry.<sup>3</sup> A small hamlet had grown up on the banks of the river, but this was nothing more than a handful of cabins. The site lay some distance from the deepest point of the harbour and this would prove a disadvantage in the years ahead. However, the large basin at its head was well protected and seen as an ideal rendezvous for ships seeking shelter from the Atlantic gales. Early travellers frequently commented on the unsuitability of the site, but all were agreed as to its aesthetic splendour.



### Sketch map of Waterfall area 1 May 1838

Showing the course of the Owenglin River, the boundary between the townlands of Clifden and Ardbear. Ardbear is in the parish of Moyrus, not Ballindoon as given here. The sketch was drawn by Corporal John Kenny, assisted by chainmen, Thomas Tool and Pat Scally, who measured the route using chains, and local man, Pat Burke, employed to identify the townland boundaries.

## **Post Office Street**

The first houses on this street were set back from the new line adopted for Main Street. They consisted of small thatched cabins and stores. Rev. Arthur Thomas (16, 1825) built the first substantial house further west and his daughter Catherine is recorded as running the post office from there until the late 1850s.<sup>65</sup> There is no evidence to indicate that Rev. Arthur Thomas was a relation to the local Church of Ireland rector Rev. Anthony Thomas, or if he ever served in Clifden. Dr William Henry Suffield (15, 1855) built an impressive house east of Arthur Thomas. Dr Suffield (1815–1872) may well have been a distant relative of the D'Arcy family. He was born in England and had obtained his medical degree from Glasgow University in 1839. He served as dispensary doctor for the town from 1842 until his retirement to Letterfrack in 1868.<sup>66</sup> There was a pedestrian entrance from Post Office Street to the Church of Ireland church running between the Thomas and Suffield houses, an archway with accommodation above was later constructed over the entrance and integrated into the Thomas house.<sup>67</sup>

*John Hart Merchant*

*Malin Stefan Merchant*



**Post Office Street c. 1860s.**

Showing Church Street on the right with Bianconi cars in the foreground.

Courtesy of the National Library STP1139



matter how industrious and well educated, a man can seldom, if ever, lay by anything to provide against the idle time'.<sup>4</sup> When they were unable to find work, some men were often forced 'to beg privately, and sometimes publicly,' in order to put food on the table. They frequently came to the door of a house, too shy to ask for help, too 'ashamed to call for relief; but when offered it, they took it with the greatest thankfulness'.<sup>5</sup>

John Corbett (sometimes Corbat), a carpenter, told of men anxious to work, but ashamed to admit that they were starving: 'Men have been at work with me, who called for half their day's hire to purchase food to enable them to work on. I saw one man, who was cutting turf for myself, obliged to give up working, being ashamed to tell that he was hungry, till he was struck through weakness ... I know they exist, but they draw their breath and that is all'. Corbett himself was not immune. But for the leniency of D'Arcy, he too might have been forced to beg: 'I am now in debt £2.9s and if my landlord was hard, and pressed on me immediately I should almost beg'. Corbett was of the opinion that the 'frequent recurrence of want, breaks down a man's spirit; the more hope of improvement the more a man will exert himself ... the man without a jacket will work like a slave'.<sup>6</sup>

From the evidence collected it seems clear that what the labourer and tradesman of the town feared the most was sickness. This was particularly so for the 'native': 'The real natives of Connemara are greatly afraid of disease; they got a great scalding before from disease, that the terror of it will never leave them'.<sup>7</sup> The 'new settlers', perhaps not having lived previously in a community so susceptible to the spread of disease, were 'not so much afraid'.<sup>8</sup>

Dr Martin Evans, dispensary doctor, found that since 1831, when a 'very malignant and fatal' cholera epidemic spread through the region, the poor were less inclined to request his attendance, 'from a fear of the doctors and medicine, to whom the peasantry attribute the propagation of cholera'.<sup>9</sup> Dr Evans was paid £100 per annum and he attended the dispensary three days a week, but for urgent cases he was available at all times. The dispensary had been established in 1819, 'for the purpose of affording medicine and advice for the sick poor in this neighbourhood'. It served all of Connemara, the next dispensaries being at Oughterard and Westport. However, even Evans admitted that he found it impossible to give his attention to all cases, 'from the extent of district'. He tried always to attend to the serious cases, 'as there is not another medical man in the whole of Cunnemara (sic)'. One witness before the inquiry described Evans as 'a very tender, agreeable man', who 'would get up at midnight to see a poor person'.<sup>10</sup> The care supplied to the poor was, according to Evans, insufficient, due to lack of funds. The dispensary, the doctor's salary and all medicine distributed to the poor were funded by voluntary subscription, with a supplement from the grand jury. The dispensary