

# HISTORY GUIDE

## CARNFUNNOCK Country Park A Tale of Two Estates

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- The late Jim Smith, son of James Smith (1888-1981) who was land steward to the Dixon family from 1935 to his retirement in 1957.
- Mr. Billy Brownlow, whose father Frank Brownlow (1900-1968) started work as a horseman for Sir Thomas in the 1920's and was promoted to cattle dealer at Cairndhu and then land steward at Carnfunnock, residing in Home Farm until 1959.
- Mr. Felix McKillop, for his comprehensive research within the publication 'History of Larne and East Antrim'.
- Mrs. Iris King, granddaughter of George Sittlington (1884-1972), who was head gardener in Cairncastle Lodge for nearly 60 years and who lived in the back lodge located at the current entrance to the Park until c.1951.
- Mrs. Heather Shannon, granddaughter of William Sutherland, chauffeur to Lady Dixon.
- E.M. Dempsey's article 'Cairndhu - Back O' The Hill'. Published in The Corran, Autumn 1989 Vol. 2 No. 7.
- Mrs Anna Mills, who grew up in Drains Bay.
- Mr Hugh Giffen, who was a young boy living in Larne when the soldiers arrived during World War II.
- Former reporters of the Larne Times and Larne Weekly Telegraph.

Articles used in the production of this publication are available from Larne Museum.

To discover our history at first hand visit

Carnfunnock Country Park, Coast Road, Larne, Co. Antrim BT40 2QG

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Carnfunnock is a townland situated in the parish of Cairncastle, between Drains Bay and Ballygally.

Its name is Gaelic, "Carn" meaning a heap of stones marking an ancient boundary, navigation point or grave and "Funnock" is derived from "Feannog" or "Fannoge" meaning Royston or Scalded

Crow. It was a well-known landmark in ancient times.

(Irish Place Names, P.W. Joyce Ed. 1910)

Today, the land at Carnfunnock is a beautiful country park

with attractions catering for locals and tourists.

### Early History

Fertile lands and bountiful sea have encouraged farming and settlement along this coastline since the Neolithic period. The Scottish coastline can be seen clearly and trading between the two countries began thousands of years ago. Both fossils and prehistoric human artefacts have been found in the surrounding area with a Neolithic settlement found in Ballygally. The miniature railway was even the reputed scene of a battle and flint arrowheads have been found on the site.

Other features which highlight a long history include Droagh motte, an earth mound castle built by the Normans in

the late twelfth century. The garrison had a commanding view over the coast and Antrim Plateau and the motte was used as a defence against the native Irish and to control the surrounding land.



### Agnew Family

Between 1600 and 1640 large numbers of English and Scottish families settled in Ulster, especially counties Antrim and Down, as noblemen parcelled out small estates, and gifted or leased their land. Sir Randal McDonnell, who became Earl of Antrim, was granted land stretching from Coleraine to Larne by James I.

The Carnfunnock lands were included in a rental deed dated 1st February 1621 made between the Right Honourable Randall McDonnell and John Shaw of Ballygally Castle. Hunting, hawking and other chief royalties were only to be undertaken by the Earl and his heirs.

On 1st May 1823 Captain William Agnew (1747-1828) obtained from the Marquis of Donegal, a permanent lease for lives renewable for ever of land in the Lough and Corran, Larne (including Drumalis).

The Agnew family, who originated from Lochnaw, Wigtownshire, Scotland in the early 1600's, lived for many generations in the parish of Kilwaughter.

Captain Agnew constructed limestone quarries in Waterloo and improved docking facilities in Larne Harbour in 1834. Despite his improvements, harbour traffic continued to decrease, due to competition from Belfast, which was making major commercial strides. However, over the following 20 years, the number of vessels using Larne increased as merchants such as Thomas Dixon & Co. of Larne used the port to import timber.

On the death of Captain Agnew in 1828, his lands and harbour passed to his son, James Agnew (1794-1880), who married Catherine Hamilton (1806-1877) in 1832. They had a daughter, Harriett, and two sons, William and Charles, who both pre-deceased their father.

James Agnew's property expanded considerably in 1834 when he inherited the Kilwaughter estate, where he lived for a time before moving to Fisherwick, Doagh until he built Cairncastle Lodge (now Carnfunnock) in c.1839. The construction of the Coast Road (1832-1842), allowed trade to expand north and in 1839 James Agnew became High Sheriff for County Antrim.

In 1851 Cairncastle Lodge was relatively small, with only 5 indoor servants, a walled garden, lime kilns and ice house.



The countryside and shoreline were extremely beautiful and fertile, producing large crops of oats, beans and successful breeding of black cattle.

Unfortunately a number of poor investments led to financial difficulties and in 1865 James Agnew sold lands, properties and business interests to James Chainé, before retiring to his house in Highbury Grove, London where he died in 1880.

### Chainé Family

James Chainé (1841-1885) was born at Muckamore, near Antrim town into a prosperous family in the linen industry. He married Henrietta de Salis Creery of Newcastle, Co. Down on 3rd February 1864 and had two sons, William (1864-1937) and James (1867-1910).





For a short time the family lived in the Chaine's ancestral home, Ballycraigy Manor in Antrim. A year after his marriage, James purchased Cairncastle

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Lodge and adjacent lands from James Agnew, at a cost of £12,800. He also bought Larne harbour (including the lands of Curran

and Drumalis) for £20,000 from the Agnew family in 1866. Chaine bought when the future of Larne Harbour was in doubt and annual income was only £50 (Larne Times, 8 August 1896). He invested heavily, improving greatly its primitive quays and facilities, promoting Larne as a port and re-establishing the Larne-Stranraer passenger service in 1872. A mail route was established in 1875 and a trans-Atlantic service between Glasgow, Larne and New York began in 1873. Using the renowned State Line vessels, this service continued until December 1889 and many emigrants left for a new life in America. In 1878 the railway was extended to the harbour and to provide travellers with accommodation he opened the Olderfleet Hotel.

During the construction at Larne Harbour, the Chaine family enlarged their summer residence, Cairncastle Lodge to incorporate 11 bedrooms, drawing room, dining room, morning room, halls, coach yard etc. It was approached by two avenues on the

landward side of the Coast Road. The current entrance to Carnfunnock Country Park was originally the back entrance for servants and deliveries to Cairncastle Lodge. The former main entrance, for the owners and guests, is now the sealed off laneway leading from the Coast Road to the Activity Centre.

There were four small lodges for employees connected to the estate. Two on the Coast

Road, one being at the back entrance, the other on the shore side

of the road, opposite the front entrance. These are now in private ownership. The land steward's dwelling, together with the farm buildings was a short distance from the 'big house' and was called "Home Farm". The fourth lodge is now gone.

In February 1874 James Chaine was elected as a Conservative MP and his last official engagement was to entertain the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) and Princess Alexandra, on their royal visit to Northern Ireland on 27th April 1885. Sadly when bidding them farewell he caught a chill which developed into pneumonia and within a week he died aged 44 years in his own hotel, the Olderfleet.



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At the time of Chaine's death, his place of abode was Ballycraigy and his final effects were £63,000, part of which stemmed from the sale of the majority of his mills, bleach greens and watercourses in Muckamore to the York Street Flax Spinning Company Ltd. His dying wish was to be buried in the moat near Waterloo House in the townland of Curran and Drumalis with the ground to be consecrated by the Church of Ireland, and for it to be an enclosed family burial ground. This can still be found at Bankheads / Town Park. It is rumoured that James Chaine was buried upright, in full yachting gear, looking out to sea, however local historian, Edith Dempsey, states that the coffin was placed in the ground as normal.



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As a mark of respect, the people of Larne raised funds by public subscription to build the Chaine Memorial Tower in 1887/88. The 28 metre (90ft) high memorial dominates the entrance to the harbour and is a replica of a traditional Irish round tower, known locally as "the giant's pencil". The Commissioners of Irish Lights converted the tower into a lighthouse in March 1899.

In his will James Chaine left his eldest son, William (1864-1937) the businesses, but requested he first finish his education at Marlborough and Magdalene College, Cambridge where he obtained a Master of Arts. William was also given the responsibility of

looking after his mother in whichever of the Chaine residences they preferred, they chose Cairncastle Lodge. William was to give his brother James (1867-1910) £20,000 within 10 years of his father's death, and if Larne Harbour proved successful, a further £10,000. James enjoyed travel and lived a gentleman's life, never taking any prominent part in the businesses.

At the close of his university career, William returned to Larne to manage the family estate. Like his father, William became a director of the old Northern Counties Railway Company and in succession a member of the Northern Counties Committee.

Amongst his many business interests, William was a director of the York Street Flax Spinning Co. Ltd, a member of the Board of Superintendents of the Belfast Bank, a Director of the Shamrock Shipping Co. Ltd., Larne Harbour and the owner and chairman of Messrs. Frederick King & Co. Ltd.

On 18th November 1891 Larne Harbour became a limited company, managed by William Chaine and Donald MacDonald. When Mr. MacDonald retired in 1912, William sold the proprietary rights of Larne Harbour to a private syndicate. However, he retained possession of valuable building ground at the harbour. He was one of the wealthiest men in the country and the largest individual landlord in Larne. (Larne Times, 8 May 1937)



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As the senior magistrate in the district, he often sat at Larne Petty Sessions and served also as High Sheriff of County Antrim being afterwards appointed a Deputy Lieutenant for the county. For some years he represented Larne on

Antrim County Council.

In politics he was President of East Antrim Unionist Association. His modesty however made him refuse any honours in connection with his political work. A devoted member of the Church of Ireland, he gave valuable service to the parish of Cairncastle as churchwarden and honorary treasurer. He also supported the parish of Larne and Inver.

In January 1913, a militia, known as the Ulster Volunteer Force, was established to oppose Home Rule. As commandant of the Larne Battalion, Chaine was the driving force behind organisation of the corps and enlistment in Larne. His interest in ex-servicemen and the dependents of those who had fallen in World War I was unbounded and he sat as Chairman of the British Legion's Old Pension Committee, dealing with the chaotic conditions during the aftermath of the war.

For many years he opened his woodlands on Saturday afternoons for Scouts to enjoy games and rambles. They learned to build fires, cook in the open, to recognise the call of the different birds and the leaves

of the various trees. Frequently Chaine joined the boys and chatted with them. Hundreds of scouts from England and Scotland were indebted to him for a few weeks camping under ideal conditions at the edge of the wood.

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The Chaine family employed 2 gardeners, one travelling in from the surrounding area while the other, George Sittlington lived on site. Many plants could be grown at Carnfunnock because of its coastal position and the shelter provided by the walled garden.

Though not a sportsman, Chaine liberally subscribed to most sporting organisations in the district. By his gift of land he enabled local residents to found the Bowling and Lawn Tennis Club (of which he was president during the 1930's) and a gift of £1,000 enabled the formation of Larne Town Golf Club.

Chaine donated a piece of bog ground north of his family's private burying-place at Waterloo to

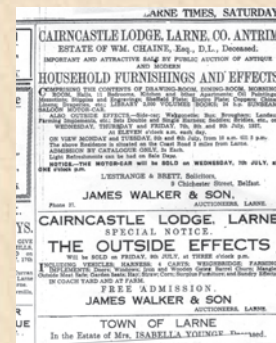
create a public park. Chaine Park was officially opened on 16th July 1929 by Mr. William Chaine as the first pleasure ground under the control of the Urban Council.



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William Chaine died in Smiley Cottage Hospital on 9th May 1937 leaving no wife or children but a personal estate valued at £375,867. His passing marked the end of a family which had played a large part in County Antrim affairs for nearly 70 years.

He generously bequeathed to each of his servants two months wages for each year of service. He also bequeathed monies to The Protestant Orphan Society and The Church of Ireland with the remaining



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£200,000 left to his cousin Augustus Alexander Nickson, who changed his name to Chaine by deed poll in 1938. Cairncastle Lodge was subsequently sold to Sir Thomas Dixon in January 1938.

Though Mr William Chaine travelled extensively *"he was never so happy as when in residence at Cairncastle Lodge, where he spent nearly the whole of his adult life and amongst his friends and neighbours there and in Larne he quietly and unostentatiously lived a life of well-doing. Paying close attention to the affairs of his estate, he yet found time to interest himself in the affairs of others, to their great advantage."* Larne Times, 8 May 1937

The Dixon family demolished Cairncastle Lodge due to its poor condition. When workers were salvaging slates from the roof one went through a window

breaking the glass, leaving the silhouette of Mr. Chaine's head. Apparently the superstitious workers panicked that the house was haunted and immediately downed tools and left. Only the solid oak front door with black sandstone surround was saved and Lady Dixon arranged for it to be incorporated within the entrance to the walled garden. This has now been replaced by a metal gate.

### Early Owners of Cairndhu

At the same time as Cairncastle Lodge was built in the 1830's, another house named "Seaview" (now Cairndhu) was constructed on neighbouring land by Charles Dawson Stewart and his wife Mary nee Wilson (1769-1850).

In 1814 their daughter Ellen Stewart (1791-1826) married a doctor from Ballyclare, called James William Agnew (1787-1823). They had two sons, James Wilson Agnew (1815-1901) who emigrated to Australia in 1839 and became Premier of Tasmania and Robert Stewart Agnew (1817-1872) who resided in 'Seaview' with his wife Elizabeth (nee Greenfield) and their 3 children.

When Robert died in 1872, ownership passed to his sons, James Charles Agnew (1845-1877) and his namesake Robert Stewart Agnew (1843-1893). Although both lived in Seaview, Robert signed over this property along with all property and land in Upper Glenarm, Upper Antrim and Upper and Lower Belfast to his brother in February 1877. When Charles died at sea in October 1877,



leaving no family, Seaview, along with 871 acres of land, passed to his sister Annie.

On 31st December 1880, Seaview was sold to Mr. Stewart Clark, who changed the name to Cairndhu. At this time it was a small house and the land included Ballygally head, with its enormous basaltic pillars, similar to the Giants Causeway.

duties when residing at Cairndhu. He was also Justice of the Peace for the counties of Linlithgow and Renfrew and Deputy Lord Lieutenant in the County of Renfrewshire, as well as a Member of Parliament for Paisley.

After the purchase the Clarks altered and enlarged the house to accommodate a large number of visitors. In 1896 a north wing was added which almost doubled the size of the house. The last major work was undertaken in 1906 with the addition of the south wing. The main entrance door on the north side led into a large hall of which the chief feature was the oak chimneypiece with carved representations of the "Jolly Beggars" and the departure of Mary Queen of Scots from Loch Leven Castle.

The billiard and smoke rooms were handsome and comfortable. A magnificent drawing room, sitting room and dining room led into the new south wing where there was a boudoir, sitting room, schoolroom and back rooms for the housekeeper and steward, kitchen, pantries, larders, butler's pantry and strong room.

At this time, too, the entire sanitary arrangements were remodelled. Lighting was by a private gas-works in the grounds.

The Clarks resided at Cairndhu each summer, travelling from Scotland in their yacht "Vandura". Apparently in the last window of the hall of Cairndhu there was a telescope for sighting

oncoming yachts.

In Mr. Stewart Clark's last summer at Cairndhu, he

provided a very handsome subscription for a bowling club, and the spacious grounds for Larne Horse Show. At the age of 78 he died of heart failure at his main residence, Dundas Castle, Linlithgowshire. Heads of department from his Cairndhu estate attended his funeral in Dalmeny Churchyard, Scotland in November 1907. In his will Mr. Clark left the sum of £1,000 to be divided between his Cairndhu staff.

His wife, Annie Clark and daughter, Miss Robina Elizabeth Clark (1862 - 1949) continued to reside regularly in Cairndhu and even after her mother's death in 1910, Robina continued to use Cairndhu as a summer residence until 1917. In March 1914 a fire broke out between the slates in the ceiling and, although confined to the East Wing, the fire and water damage was considerable.

In August 1918, Cairndhu was sold for £8,000 to Sir Thomas Dixon and his wife Lady Edith Dixon, Mr Stewart Clark's daughter.

## Dixon Family

Sir Thomas and Lady Edith Dixon had a long family connection with Larne. Sir Thomas' paternal grandfather (Mr. Thomas Dixon) and Lady Dixon's maternal grandfather (Mr. John Smiley) were both illustrious businessmen and members of the Board of Town Commissioners.

Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon were highly respected and generous benefactors *"who were never known to refuse support, financial or otherwise to every deserving cause needing assistance"* (Larne Times, 5 June 1947). On 18th April 2008, a plaque was erected by Larne and District Historical Society, on the wall of the Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon building at Victoria Road, Larne, to acknowledge some of the benevolent acts carried out by Sir Thomas and his wife.

## Sir Thomas Dixon

Sir Thomas was born Thomas James Dixon in Groomsport, Co. Down on 29th May 1868, the eldest son of the Right Honourable Sir Daniel Dixon (1844 -1907), who was 1st baronet of Ballymenock, the first Lord Mayor of Belfast and Westminster MP for North Belfast. His mother, Lizzie, daughter of James Agnew married Sir Daniel in Belfast on 20th August 1867 but sadly died on 4th June 1868 when Sir

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Smiley of 'Drumalis.' Incidentally, Sir Hugh's wife, Miss Elizabeth Kerr, was a niece of Mr. Stewart Clark. Mr. Clark's children were all born in Scotland, including 4 daughters and one son, John Stewart Clark, who was made a baronet in 1913.

Mr. Stewart Clark was a titan of industry, he and his four brothers took over from their father and uncle a small sewing thread business at the Anchor Mills in Paisley. They made the business one of the most profitable textile concerns in Britain with factories all over the world. He became Justice of the Peace and Deputy Lieutenant for County Antrim and regularly performed magisterial

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Thomas was just a baby. In 1870 his father remarried Annie Shaw and went on to have three more sons and five daughters.

Following a private education in England, Sir Thomas entered the family business, Thomas Dixon & Sons timber merchants and owners of the Lord Line Shipping Company. He became a director and on the death of his father in 1907, he succeeded his father as second Baronet and became managing director until the firm's closure in 1938. He was an astute businessman and generously gave to many causes designed for the public good.

From 1924 to 1949 he was a member of the Senate of Northern Ireland and was admitted to the Privy Council of Northern Ireland in 1931. He was appointed High Sheriff of County Antrim in 1912 and of County Down in 1913 and was given the position of His Majesty's Lord Lieutenant of Belfast from 1924 until his death.

Sir Thomas had a great love of sport, in particular racing, hunting and shooting. He was interested in horses and hunted with the East Antrim Hounds and the County Down Staghounds. He owned numerous racehorses which were kept at the family training stables in Co. Kildare and Yorkshire, England. He was a popular figure at races throughout Britain and Ireland, winning the Ulster Derby with Owenstown in 1937 and the Bessborough Stakes at Ascot with Cariff in 1935 and 1936.

Sir Thomas married Edith (1871-1964), youngest daughter of Stewart Clark of Dundas Castle, South Queensferry, Scotland and Cairndhu on 7th February 1906 in Dalmeny Church, South Queensferry. (see section on Stewart Clark family pages 7-8)

After their marriage, the Dixons lived for varying periods at Graymount, Hillsborough Castle, Drumdarragh, near Doagh, Luttrellstown and Lucan in Dublin before purchasing Lady Dixon's childhood summer residence, Cairndhu and Ballygally Head. The estate was increased to nearly 500 acres when the adjoining properties of Droagh (formerly Sir Edward Coey's estate) and Carnfunnock (William Chaine's property) were purchased. (see section on Chaine family pages 2-6)



The Dixon family held many house and garden parties and entertained public dignitaries with grouse shooting in the Antrim Hills. More improvements were made to the house including the servants dining hall. The house was beautiful and Cairndhu had a large workforce, with 20 inside staff, kitchen staff, ladies maids and upstairs staff.

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Sir Thomas occupied his time with livestock farming, including a herd of dairy cows. The farm office, stables and cattle byres were based at Hillhead Farm, now the clubhouse of Cairndhu Golf Club. Mr. Frank Brownlow was responsible for looking after the extensive herds of cattle and sheep at Carnfunnock, Cairndhu and hill land at Ballyboley. He travelled to auctions all over Ireland to purchase cattle for Sir Thomas and managed the farm at Cairndhu.

The land at Cairndhu was used for grazing cattle, mainly Short Horns and Galloway cattle, which were bred for



beef. Two or three mornings per week they would inspect the cattle together and if Mr. Brownlow pointed out to Sir Thomas that neighbouring farms were for sale, such as Droagh Farm, Sir Thomas would buy them and knock down hedges to have his fields extended for grazing. Sir Thomas would often have his chauffeur, Mr. Sandy Moreland drive him round the fields in his yellow and black Rolls-Royce, to see his cattle.

Land stewards and head gardeners on the Cairndhu estate included Mr. Hugh Henderson (Scottish) from 1884 -1914; Mr. James Todd (Scottish); Mr. James Dent (English) and lastly Mr. James

Smith (Scottish).

Mr. Smith was responsible for the gardens and the estate that included 22 gardeners and estate workers. In 1937 when Carnfunnock was merged with Cairndhu, he was responsible for the management of the whole estate, which consisted of 500 acres.

In 1938 the Urban Council applied for Borough status and on 23rd May 1939 the Charter of Incorporation was granted by His Majesty, King George VI and received by Sir Thomas, who was unanimously elected as Larne's first Mayor, serving from 1939 to 1941. Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon presented a Mayoral Chain of Office and Mayoress badge to the Council. It was composed of 40 golden medallions linked together with a hanging pendant of the Larne Coat of Arms. The inscription on the reverse of the larger shield was:

*"Presented to the Borough of Larne on its inauguration by Sir Thomas and Lady Edith Dixon, Cairndhu, May 1939."*

In September 1939, at the outbreak of World War II, Sir Thomas, as Mayor of the Borough (1939-1941), handed over his Larne residence for use as a War Hospital Supply Depot and organised the Y.M.C.A. canteen at the harbour. Lady Dixon was president of the Ulster



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Gift Fund and War Hospital Supply Depot for Serving Forces (Larne Depot) with donations requested in October 1939 to purchase necessary materials. Sir Thomas Dixon provided his land, but he and his wife were able to live independently in Cairndhu without being affected.

The Carnfunnock walled garden grew cabbage, cauliflower and other vegetables that were used

22 in Cairndhu or taken to Lady Dixon's friends and family. In 1940 Lady Dixon gave one of her three Rolls Royces to be converted into an ambulance for first aid parties to the Larne A.R.P. Ambulance Service.

The unit stationed in Carnfunnock was a transport / infantry unit from the Royal Electrical Mechanical Engineers (REME). Up to 500 soldiers were stationed here before returning to the front. This was not a strategic military base, but its coastal location provided an excellent viewpoint.



23 House now stands.

This was a secure camp with armed

guards located at the entrance to the estate. Locals remember walking along the unlit Coast Road in the dark and hearing soldiers shouting 'Halt - who goes there?' and having rifles pointed at them.

German prisoners of war were regularly brought in to work in the old quarry between the lime kilns. They constructed a shooting range for training the soldiers, which involved digging a ditch out of the bank and carrying sand from the avenue through the fields. The prisoners would carve small wooden toys for the Brownlow children in exchange for cigarettes. The remnants of barbed wire circling around groups of trees can still be found in the park as these areas were intended for fencing off prisoners.



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In May 1947, Sir Thomas Dixon celebrated his 79th birthday and he and Lady Dixon marked the occasion by announcing a generous gift. After 40 years at Cairndhu the Dixon's donated their 60 room family home, with 100 acres of the estate, to the Ministry of Health and Local Government for use as a convalescent home / hospital. At the time Lady Dixon said that she was very sorry to be going away from the house that her father built. *"It's too big for us now, though. It was different in the days when we could entertain."* (Larne Times, 5 June 1947) See pages 15-16 for history of hospital and Carnfunnock House.

Sir Thomas died on holiday at the Majestic Hotel in Harrogate, England on

10th May 1950, aged 81. His body was brought back on the Stranraer steam boat on route to his last residence, Wilmont House, Dunmurry. The funeral service was held at St. Anne's Cathedral before burial at Dundonald Cemetery. His younger brother Herbert, who had already been elevated to the peerage as Baron Glentoran, succeeded Sir Thomas in the baronetcy. At the time of Sir Thomas' death his effects were valued at over £389,000.

### Lady Dixon

Lady Dixon was made Dame of the British Empire in June 1921 in recognition



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of her valuable work on behalf of the men of all the services during the 1914-1918 war, and for her generous support and constant interest in the Sailors' and Soldiers' Service Club. On 27th August 1918 a Grand Summer Fete was held at Cairndhu in aid of the Cairncastle Prisoners of War Fund. The opening ceremony involved Lady Dixon,



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and the Chairman was Wm. Chaine Esq. DL. On the day the heavens opened resulting in the outdoor activities being a bit curtailed and the marquees overcrowded. At the time she said, *"No cause more appealed to their hearts than the Prisoners-of-war Fund. These men, of their*

*own free will, went out to fight for us, and now that they were in the hands of a cruel enemy we could not do too much to show our gratitude to them"*. The financial result however was gratifying with almost £500 being raised.

Her activities during World War II were no less prominent. She was part of the central Committee for War Hospital Supply Depots, which was formed in September 1939 for the purpose of providing clothing and bandages to military hospitals and woollen comforts to brighten the lives of their men-folk in the services, on the seas, in the hospitals or interned in prison camps in enemy territory. Lady Dixon held high office in many of the great national organisations such as the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and the St. John Ambulance Brigade. She was made President of the Larne St. John Ambulance Brigade in September 1939. For many years she was a vice president of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council. She was also honoured with Freeman of the Borough of Larne.

As wife of His Majesty's Lieutenant, Lady Dixon took a prominent part in official ceremonies and often helped to entertain royalty including hosting HRH Princess Margaret in Cairndhu for lunch in October 1947, as she toured along the Antrim Coast Road. Although taking part in many official ceremonies during her husband's lifetime, she was of a quiet and reserved nature and was never happier than when she was escorting friends around her immaculately kept gardens. There were 6-tiered gardens within Cairndhu:

22. Donations acknowledgement for Ulster Gift Fund (October 1939) © Larne Times. 23. Driveway within Carnfunnock (mid 20th century) Photographer unknown. 24. Lime kiln (2002) © Chris Hill Photographic. 25. Lady Dixon as a young lady © Lafayette Photography. 26. Advertisement for Fund Raising Fete (August 1918) © Larne Weekly Telegraph



## Cairndhu Gardens

### 1. The 'Old World Garden'

This was Lady Dixon's pride and joy with herbaceous perennials and a cherry tree walk to the wishing well. It is now part of the Carnfunnock Wildlife Garden. It was well known that *'during her travels Lady Dixon was in the habit of bringing back some rare specimens which*



*had taken her fancy.'* Arriving for work, Mr. Hugh Dempsey, Lady Dixon's personal

gardener would receive word to meet her by the side-door at a set time, and together they would proceed to the gardens to plant out her newly found treasures.

### 2. Vegetable and Flower Garden

The vegetable and flower garden also had two very large herbaceous borders. Horse drawn carts brought sand from Ballygally beach to be mixed into the soil of the asparagus beds.

### 3. Rose Garden

Many types of rose grew here, with shades of pink to the dark red *'Ena Harkness'*.

### 4. Privet Hedge Maze

Behind the Rose Garden was a low-level privet hedge maze which contained a garden seat in the centre. There was one entrance and one exit and the grass was cut with a lawnmower right into the centre of the maze.

### 5. Heather Garden

The specially created Heather Garden was near Ballygally head and it was designed by Mr. Smith. He used heather from the hills and varieties including H.E. Beale, Spring-

wood White and Spring-wood Pink, making a wonderful display. The large leaf hedge (*Escallonia macrantha*) that grew there would shelter Lady Dixon from the wind as she sat in the sun.



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### 6. Spring Garden

Finally there was the Spring Garden, which was mainly a beautiful display of flowering daffodils and narcissus.

Lady Dixon was a very caring person, interested in her staff and their families ensuring their homes were well maintained. When local children had to walk the 3.5 miles to Sunday school in Cairncastle, Lady Dixon would have her chauffeur stop and give them a lift from Cairncastle Brae to the gates at Cairndhu.

During the two week worker's summer holidays she arranged for the Cairndhu cattle lorry to drive to Sir Thomas' timber mills in York Road, Belfast and collect the working horses, they would then be brought to Cairndhu to graze the fields and have a rest and holiday as well.

Lady Dixon was particularly interested in nursing. She was President of Larne District Nursing Society for 30 out of its 55 year existence until its disbandment in 1948 and was president of the "Annie Clark Trust Fund" which had been set up by her mother. In July 1928 a fete was organised in Cairndhu on behalf of the Maternity Hospital Building Fund, with Lady Dixon being a long time member of the Committee of Management. Activities included dancing, bridge, outdoor amusements including clock golf, a lawn tennis tournament, afternoon tea on the terrace and music from the Royal Ulster Constabulary. The fund raising event attracted over 400 people with such dignitaries as the Duke and Duchess of Abercorn.

After Lady Dixon sold Carnfunnock House and surrounding land to Larne Borough Council in 1957, the Council allowed her to continue to use the building and her maid, Jean McIlmoyle, remained in the summerhouse for a number of years. Additionally the Brownlow family rented the farm and land from the Council until the early 1960's, before moving to a house in Larne. Lady Dixon continued to live for over a decade after Sir Thomas' death. As

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they were devoted to each other in life, she felt his loss deeply. This was shown in a letter to her

former chauffeur, William Sutherland. *"How broken my life is now, but I have those wonderful memories of all he was. I am very lonely without him."*



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On 20th January 1964, the elderly Lady Dixon died at her residence in Malone Park, Belfast and was buried in Dundonald Cemetery beside her husband. She left more than £100,000 to charitable institutions in Northern Ireland. The majority of her property and effects were divided between her nephews and nieces. For the full time employees at Carnfunnock she bequeathed £10 for each year of service. At the time of Lady Dixon's death Larne Mayor, Councillor J.W. Sandford said, *"Larne has lost its greatest benefactor. Both Lady Dixon and Sir Thomas always had the welfare of the town and district at heart."*

In June 1964 the contents of Carnfunnock House were sold by auction from a marquee on the front lawn with many locals taking the opportunity to purchase a small memento. Larne Borough Council rented this property out until 1973 when it issued a long-term lease to Larne Lions Club to use the chalet as a holiday home for the elderly and disadvantaged groups. This arrangement continues today.



## Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon Hospital

In late 1947, the Dixons left Cairndhu to live in their other property, Wilmont House, Dunmurry which was closer to Belfast and which they had purchased



for £21,500 in 1919. In January 1948 the Dixons auctioned off over 560 items from Cairndhu including

31 carpets, prints, oil paintings and furniture. To keep their association, they retained the Carnfunnock land and built a chalet bungalow on the former site of Cairncastle Lodge. This gave them somewhere to stay whenever they visited. It became known as Carnfunnock House, now used by the Lions Club. During this time the Brownlow family acted as land stewards for the Dixons, caring for the Carnfunnock grounds, whilst Mr. Smith remained responsible for the grounds and livestock in the possession of the hospital authority.

Speaking in 1954, Lady Dixon recognised the great demand for hospital beds, with patients sometimes sent home sooner than they might have been and Sir Thomas had felt that Cairndhu might be able to fill that gap. The house was suitable as a hospital as the rooms were "large, airy, well lit and the house was equipped throughout with all modern

conveniences." The kitchens, of which Lady Dixon was particularly proud, were hotel-like in their layout and the windows and verandas commanded magnificent views, well kept lawns and gardens merged into parkland that stretched to the Coast Road. "He would indeed be a very sick patient who would not be helped in his recovery by all this." The memory of these two generous benefactors was perpetuated in the hospitals name.

In January 1950, Dame Debra Parker, Minister of Health and Local Government officially opened the Sir Thomas and Lady Edith Dixon Hospital - the first convalescent hospital to be owned by the Northern Ireland Hospitals' Authority. The 3-storey hospital could accommodate up to 40 patients, with a maximum stay of 6 weeks. Other facilities included: reception room, two dining rooms (male and female), a nurses sitting room, hall, dining room and bedrooms, several bathrooms, separate men and women's sitting rooms, a library, piano, billiard room, facilities for the matron, a surgery and examination room and putting green. There was even a hard tennis court for the nurses. (Larne Times, 26 Jan 1950). It was not necessary to make any structural alterations to the house but it required re-wiring and some changes to the heating and sewage arrangements to conform to hospital standards. The hospital tried to be self sufficient with 10 men employed to look after a high grade herd of 21 dairy cattle kept on the farm and the large vegetable

gardens with 5 glass houses which provided fresh food such as crops, vegetables and fruit not only for Cairndhu, but also for other hospitals such as the Moyle and Musgrave Park in Belfast.

In 1950 Larne Times said "those patients who have the good fortune to recover their health amongst the lawns, gardens and timber of the Cairndhu estate and who stop to think, will pay tribute to the name Dixon." "As one patient remarked "If you don't get well here, you won't get well anywhere." (Larne Times, 26 January 1950.)

Cairndhu hospital operated until January 1986, when the Department of Health and Social Services, ever mindful of budgetary difficulties, took the controversial step to close it. It provided care for nearly 35 years closing on 1st June 1986 and was subsequently acquired by Larne Borough Council. In 1995 it was sold to a property developer along with 22 acres of ground and is now in private ownership.

## Dixon Generosity

The Dixon's presented many other gifts to Larne and district including:

- A painting of Sir Thomas (1951).
- £1,000 to Cairndhu hospital to provide amenities for the patients (1950).
- £1,000 to fund a scholarship in Larne Grammar School known as "The Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon Scholarship" (1950).

- The Mayoress chain of office (1957).
- Robes for the Mayor, Aldermen, Councillors and Mace Bearer, which were worn for the first time by the Councillors when Larne celebrated its Silver Jubilee (1964).
- The 4-acre Dixon Park including bandstand and fully equipped playground with £500 for the provision of musical entertainment (1935).
- £10,000 towards the conversion of the former Technical College into council offices and the complete furnishing of the Mayors parlour, now known as Sir Thomas Dixon Buildings (1961-1964).
- Provision of headquarters at Barnhill for First Larne Company of the Boys' Brigade along with band instruments and regular subscriptions. The Dixons were presidents of the company.
- The provision of a church/ community hall at Drains Bay for the Church of Ireland and Presbyterian communities with £1,000 to each church (pre-1950). This is now a community facility called Dixon Hall.





## Larne Borough Council

In August 1956 Lady Dixon agreed to sell her lands at Carnfunnock to Larne Borough Council who *"literally jumped to clinch the bargain, happy in the fact that the town can now further develop free from the bogey of inflated land prices"* (Larne Times, 16 August 1956). Initially the Council



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thought they might earmark a portion for playing fields of which there was a serious shortage in Larne Town, although it was some distance from the town. However the Council *"had much on its hands with industrial development, and it may be some considerable time before development on their latest acquisition takes place."* (Larne Times, 16 August 1956)

In December 1956, the Council agreed that Mr. Brownlow, land steward for the Dixon's, could continue to live in 'Home Farm' and rent the Carnfunnock land for grazing over a 3 year period, which would give them time to decide how to develop the estate for the benefit of the people of Larne.

In early 1957 Larne Borough Council subsequently took ownership of approx. 473 acres of land in Carnfunnock at a favourable cost of £25,000, including numerous buildings, the walled garden and the Carnfunnock House chalet (now the Larne Lions Club Holiday Home). Buildings included Brownlow House (Frank Brownlow, Land

steward); Main Lodge; Shore Lodge (J. Mulligan, gardener); Red House (WJ Brownlow, farm worker); North Lodge (James Black, farm worker); White House (girl guides); Droagh House (James Hunter, farm worker); Turks House and two houses in Tobergel.

At this time the Council agreed to allow Lady Dixon to use Carnfunnock House as a residence during her lifetime. Initially she declined, as it was her intention to vacate Carnfunnock by June 1957 and to set up permanent residence in Scotland. However, she reconsidered and decided to keep Carnfunnock House as a summer residence and retained staff to maintain this home until her death in 1964. As the Council stated, *"It has always been a happiness to her to be near Larne, and she has much pleasure in thinking she has still a home at Carnfunnock."*

From the late 1950's to 1970's the Council faced difficulties in formulating a comprehensive plan for the development of the estate. It was agreed that re-forestation was uneconomical and when various organisations were offered playing fields in the area, these were declined as being too far from the town and lacking in transport facilities. The Council therefore continued to rent out the properties and the land for grazing. When opportunities arose they also generated income through letting the walled garden as a market garden and leasing land to the golf club. The Scouts still maintained their association and regularly camped within the Park.

In 1981 Larne Borough Council revealed a master plan to transform Carnfunnock into a major tourist attraction. At one stage in its development it was suggested that it should be called Prince William Country Park, to mark the birth of Prince William in 1982.



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Developments commenced in the mid 1980's, and by 1985 the maze, designed in the shape of Northern Ireland was in place. By 1986 the Visitor Centre had opened consisting of a cafeteria, laundry and toilet facilities for campers and exhibition / craft space.



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Work on the walled garden started in January 1988. It was officially opened as a country park by HRH the Duchess of Kent on 23rd July 1990, accompanied by the Secretary of State, Peter Brooke. HRH planted a weeping birch to commemorate the occasion, which can still be seen in the walled garden today.

Over the years the Council has continued to add unique attractions, thanks initially

to the assistance of European funding. The Activity Centre was opened in 1993



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and originally contained a putting green, crazy golf, target ball, an outdoor adventure play area, associated control building, paved areas and 20 space car park. A 9-hole par 3 golf course was also opened in 1995.



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The park continues to change and develop with the introduction of new activities by private operators and additional investment by Larne Borough Council.

Today Carnfunnock attracts thousands of visitors each year and a considerable amount of countryside within the Antrim Coast Road has been preserved for all to visit and enjoy, just as Lady Dixon would have wanted.

***Up to date information on the park's attractions and activities can be found within the Carnfunnock Country Park visitor guide.***

34. Brownlow family at Home Farm (mid 20th century) Photograph courtesy of Mr. Billy Brownlow. 35. Carnfunnock playground at Visitor Centre (late 1980's) Photographer unknown. 36. Carnfunnock Visitor Centre (late 1980's) Photographer unknown. 37. Crazy Golf at Activity Centre (mid 1990's) Photographer unknown. 38. Target Golf at Activity Centre (mid 1990's) Photographer unknown.