



Shoebox

THE FAMILY OF THOMAS BALFE AND SARAH KENNY

From Kilcavan to South Elmsley

Kilcavan is an elevated townland located to the north of the town of Carnew in south County Wicklow. The name Kilcavan is an anglicisation of the Irish "Cill Chaemhain" or "Church of Caeman." Very little remains of this ancient church. In the nineteenth century all that survived the passage of many centuries was a pile of stones on the northern perimeter of a field known as the "Church Meadow." Also surviving is a rough-hewn granite cross hidden away in a boundary fence. Kilcavan has an area of 765 acres. The townland is dominated by huge heaps of shale; useless shale removed over centuries in order to uncover the underlying usable roofing slate. The roadway passing through



Sarah (Kenny) Balfe



Thomas Balfe (junior) and Ann Hourigan

Kilcavan could only be classified as a laneway. The old road is not much wider than the average motor car and it is flanked on either side by ancient stone walls and tall thorn hedges.

It was to here that, in the summer of 2014, John Balfe returned from North Bay, Ontario. He was returning home to visit the homeland of his ancestors. As John and his wife Marg walked through the lush verdant fields, John's long-lost cousin, Patricia Kenny, pointed out an overgrown spring well - "Balfe's Well." The ancient well was located in a field known as "Balfe's Meadow." It was almost 170 years since anyone bearing the Balfe name had walked the land of Kilcavan. They had left behind them their family name, a name which was now written into the ancient landscape. It was from this spring well that the Balfe family fetched their daily supply of fresh water.

A woman before her time, the daughter of Sarah (Balfe) O'Meara at a business meeting for Metropolitan Life in Buffalo New York in 1934, in the midst of the Great Recession. She is the only woman at this business meeting.



The four daughters of Thomas and Sarah Balfe. Three of the girls were born in Kilcavan.





◀ **Provisions allowances for emigrants departing Kilcavan and Hillbrook in 1847.**

In November 1831 John's ancestor, Thomas Balfe married Sarah Kenny in the parish church at Tomacork. The couple gave the parish priest, Father Murphy, the sum of five shillings for performing the ceremony. It was a generous stipend, the equivalent of a labouring man's average weekly wage. Their first child, Mary, was born ten months after the couple wed. In the spring of 1847, the Balfe family decided to avail of the offer of assisted emigration from Earl Fitzwilliam. There was less ignominy in emigrating than in subsisting on soup made by an English landlord and distributed on Carnew's Wool Green



The "Church Meadow" at Kilcavan. Stones are used as grave markers in the ancient "church yard."

from an iron cauldron cast in an English foundry. The Balfes were, during the famine years, joined in their exit by no less than 49 families from Kilcavan and the adjoining townlands of Hillbrook to the north and Parkmore to the south. In 1841 Kilcavan had 40 inhabited houses. In 1851 only 25 remained. Most of the departing families were bound together by bonds of kinship. Old Ned Balfe was 67 years of age. In Biblical fashion he set out to lead his extended family and his neighbours to the promised land. For a time, it was believed that Ned had not travelled. He does not appear in the Canadian census of 1851. He



▲ **The gravestone of Thomas and Sarah Balfe in Smiths Falls, Ontario.**

did, however, receive a provisions allowance to assist with his journey. Somewhere between Kilcavan and South Elmsley in Ontario his fellow travellers bade their final farewell to old Ned.

The Balfe family, together with fifteen neighbouring families, departed from the port of New Ross on 16 May 1847. The vessel on which they sailed was the *Agent* which, amongst others, had on board 169 emigrants from

Earl Fitzwilliam's estate. The emigrants received a supplement to their provisions allowance as a result of the departure being delayed due to a lack of favourable winds. Travelling with Tommy (40) and Sarah (35) were their four children, Mary, Margaret, Ann, and Thomas. By the time of the 1851 Canadian census two further children, Sally and Michael, had arrived. Also travelling with them was a teenage boy, a Thomas Balfe. Biddy Shannon, a cousin of Tommy Balfe's, and her ten-year-old son were also listed but

were scratched from the list. The normally meticulous Coolattin recordkeeping was now showing signs of the enormous pressure being placed upon it by the demands of a mass exodus. In the Emigration Book the number of persons in the Balfe family is correctly given as being seven. However, the names given are different from those recorded by the South Elmsley enumerator at the time of the 1851 Canadian census.

In Canada, Thomas and Sarah settled for a while in Western Ontario before moving to Lombardy in South Elmsley Township. Thomas and his son, Thomas Junior, once



▲ **Gravestone of the Balfes who stayed at home.**

farmed 300 acres along what became known as Highway 15. Later in the century, Thomas Junior bought Rose Farm, the future site of Smiths Falls Golf and Country Club. In 1953, this golf course was built on the 114-acre farm purchased from Miss Gertrude Balfe. The farm was located on the road between Concessions 2 and 3. With its rolling contours and Otter Creek running through it, the Rose Farm was ideally suited for the development of a golf course. Today the only remaining stones from the original farmhouse are built into the fireplace of the clubhouse dining room. In 2017, the town of Carnew in County Wicklow entered a twinning arrangement with the town of Smiths Falls, Ontario. To celebrate the link between the two communities the Irish ambassador to Canada, His Excellency Mr. Jim Kelly, unveiled a commemorative plaque at the golf club in Smiths Falls.

Descendants of Thomas and Sal Balfe are today scattered throughout Ontario in places as far flung as Ottawa, Kingston, and North Bay. They



frequently return to south Wicklow to walk the land once farmed by their Balfe ancestors. The Balfes are long gone from Kilcavan.

Today, all that remains as a memory to their once presence here is a field still referred to as *"Balfe's Meadow"*. For the returning Balfe descendants it is an emotional experience when standing at the spring well known as *"Balfe's Well"*, the very place from which the Balfes obtained their supply of fresh water.

In 2018, Mary (Balfe) Campeau, Anne (Balfe) Kraushaar, and John Balfe all returned to visit their homeland. Here they are pictured getting genealogical advice from County Wicklow Archivist, Catherine Wright.



Tomacork church. It was here that Thomas and Sarah were married in 1831. It was here also that their first four children were baptised.