



Hastings Cottage

By John O'Brien

In the early and middle 1960s, along with my mother, I would occasionally visit our distant cousins, The Hastings of Tullyvarraga. We would set out by bicycle, and the journey for me got really adventurous when we turned off the old concrete road near where the Smithstown Industrial estate now is. The course of this by road is still traceable; crossing the main road near the Oakwood, passing between Finian Park and Tullyvarraga Hill, and past the GAA club. Back then this little road was flanked by tall dark imposing whitethorn hedges, and there was a deep water filled ditch at some point as I recall. The only other inhabited house was that of the O'Gormans.

At the end of the road, was the well-kept and whitewashed house and small farmyard of the Hastings, nestling in the shade of the high ground to the west, and well sheltered from the prevailing wind. This seemed to me, as young boy, to be the most remote and lonely place

one could live. The scene was of total solitude, and when I would venture over the field to the south the view of the Shannon Estuary was breath taking.

The house was a typical thatched farmhouse, common in Ireland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Generally the walls of such houses were built of mud, but in this instance, good quality stone was used in the lower parts and around door and windows. The main room was the large kitchen in the middle. At the east end of the kitchen was the enormous open fireplace, with the wheel bellows at the side and a soot- black crane over the fire. As was typical, the furniture was sparse. Apart from table and sughan chairs, the only other piece of furniture I remember was the big dresser which displayed the willow pattern dishes in the top shelves, along with plates, cups and saucers. In the cupboard underneath, everything else required in the kitchen was contained.

However in this particular dresser, I now understand there was a compartment which very few were aware of. This compartment was used to conceal guns during the war of Independence. Regrettably at the time of my visits to the Hastings I was not aware of this, or of the fact that the Hastings operated a safe house during the war of Independence. In fact the English General Lucas spent some of his time as a captive in the house in 1920. John Hastings would have been a young man at that time, and would have had first hand information to relate.

It is a pity that the house was vandalised some years ago, and that it has been left to deteriorate to its present state. It could have served as an educational and tourist feature. Even in its present overgrown state, the site is still worth preserving. Perhaps an information point could be created there and the lower stone section of the walls preserved, providing a little link between the modern town and the long lost lifestyle of a bygone era.