



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

The great pass between Leinster and Connaught



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Athlone Barracks, today's Custume Barracks, can trace its origins to the late 17th Century.

The Williamite army, fresh from its victory in the 1691 Siege of Athlone, fortified the town as a base for their future operations and placed a few regiments of troops in a series of wooden huts on the west side of the river, thereby establishing the barracks.

It was greatly extended and enhanced between 1784 and 1815 during a period when the British government was fearful of French incursions into Ireland. Those works transformed the barracks into an impressive complex of buildings, a fact that was recounted by the Athlone-based Reverend Annesley Streat, who compiled a report on the locality in 1819.

Streat described the barracks as being able to accommodate 2,000 troops, along with two magazines, an armoury, warehouses, multiple hospitals and an ordnance yard, 'wherein are constantly employed the several artificers necessary for making all the iron and timber works of gun carriages, and other military engines'.

A community of the impoverished

But what was the relationship between these barracks and the wider locality? One problem we encounter when we attempt to reconstruct the past is that the voices of the powerful and the wealthy are often all that remain. We have the memoirs of officers and the recollections of wealthy travellers who toured through the locality. We have the official reports of the ruling establishment, all cold statistics and seething prejudices, and we have the news as reported in the press.

But, amid the cacophony, we hear little from the common soldiers and practically nothing from the women and children whose lives centred around the barracks. What glimpses we can gain of their lives show that they lived in harsh and unforgiving times.

The Reverend Streat described the multitude of destitute people who crowded around the military garrison: 'There are beggars from every county in Ireland, and even from England and Scotland - Athlone being the great pass between Leinster and Connaught, brings thither many settlers of that description; and a number of soldier's wives, and their children, who are left by their husbands when ordered on foreign service, as well as the widows of those who die in the garrison, serve to render that class of the community still more numerous.'

It seems that many of those



A scene from Athlone, around 1821

destitute women, whose husbands were dead or stationed abroad, were forced to provide for themselves and their children through prostitution.

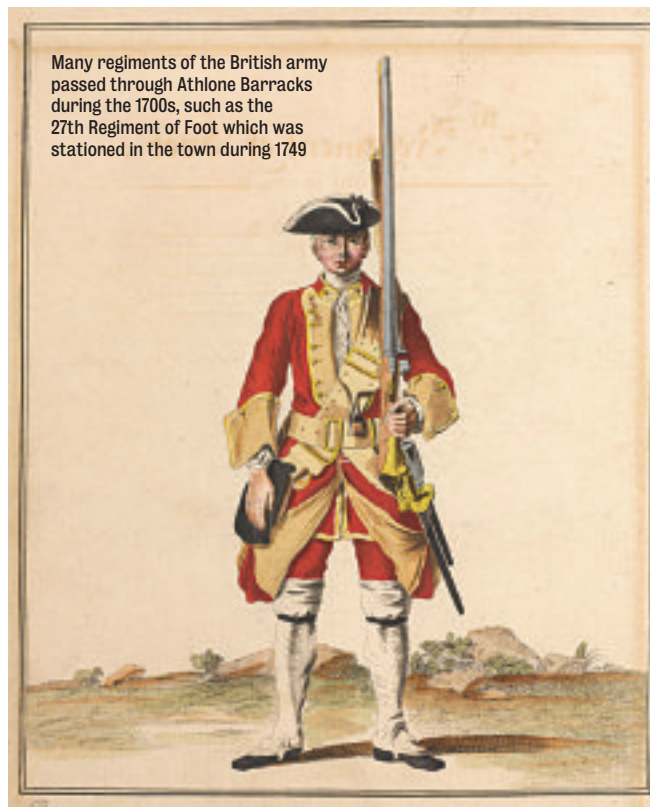
In his report on Athlone, Streat stated that prostitution was so common that it could be seen in all the streets of the town and its vicinity.

One God, many choices

The existence of the barracks created a thriving trade in the sale of sex and it also helped to create a marketplace in the saving of souls by providing an active congregation for various churches. The Reverend John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, is known to have preached in the Riding School in the Barracks during a visit to Athlone and the religious influence of soldiers of various faiths and nationalities was manifested in the buildings of the town, as can be seen in this account from a Scottish soldier who served in Ireland with the 92nd Regiment of Foot.

The soldier was briefly stationed in Moate and then in Athlone from October 1798 to June 1799. 'In this place', he later recalled, 'it pleased God to lead my mind to serious and deep reflection, and to begin a work of sharp conviction, such as I had never experienced before. There was a Catholic Chapel, an English Church, and a Wesleyan Methodist Meeting-house in the town'.

The Scottish soldier spent much of his time in the Methodist house, where 'there were always public prayers evening and morning, and sermon on the Lord's day, and often twice a-week in the evenings'. There, he began to read his 'Bible with more than common attention'.



Many regiments of the British army passed through Athlone Barracks during the 1700s, such as the 27th Regiment of Foot which was stationed in the town during 1749

Begging to be shot

Displays of religious devotion may have been common but so were displays of cruelty. The barracks itself was seemingly not a healthy nor happy place, especially during the 1700s and the first half of the 1800s.

Contemporary records contain many instances of violence, including murder, carried out by soldiers and officers both within the barracks and against members of the public. Desertions were a regular occurrence, for which the offending soldiers

faced severe, sometimes grotesque punishments, as can be seen in a report from the Freeman's Journal newspaper in 1794 detailing the treatment of a deserter from the 18th Light Dragoons.

The soldier was tried by court martial before being sentenced to 1000 lashes of the whip and the paper's matter-of-fact report did not hide the brutality of the man's punishment. He received the first 600 of the lashes in the presence of a crowd and the Freeman's Journal described the scene: 'He bore his punishment with hardened resolution - yet at some intervals intreated that he might be shot. He did not receive the whole of those lashes on the back - some were given to him on another part, where he appeared to have more feeling; but for all his sufferings, there appeared to be no pity among those who beheld his castigation.'

The man's ultimate fate is unclear but his suffering was not yet over. The paper advised that he was due to receive the remaining 400 lashes in a few days and 'then to be drummed out of the regiment'.

Perhaps unsanitary conditions were a contributory factor to the tensions that pervaded the barracks during that time. It was built on marshy land and contemporary reports show that many soldiers suffered from water-borne diseases, while there are numerous references to the hospitals being full to overflowing.

However, the barracks would be redeveloped in the early 1850s and the entire complex would become a much healthier place in which to live and work. In a future article, we will follow some of the stories from the barracks during those later decades.