



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

Modern, clean and open for business: Moate in 1811



IAN KENNEALLY
Historian and Author

The beginnings of the modern tourist industry emerged in the century between 1750 and 1850.

In the first half of that period, Irish locations such as the Lakes of Killarney and the Giant's Causeway became internationally recognised tourist sites and Ireland increasingly came to be seen as a picturesque destination for wealthy British travellers.

A rough guide to Ireland

As part of this flourishing industry, there emerged a new market for tourist guides and travelogues. Historians such as William Williams have estimated that over 570 travel accounts of Ireland were published in the century after 1750, mostly 'produced by British and Anglo-Irish writers'. One such example was written by A. Atkinson, whose 'The Irish Tourist' was published in 1815. The book – whose full title was 'The Irish Tourist: in a series of picturesque views, travelling incidents, and observations, statistical, political and moral on the character and aspect of the Irish nation' – recounted Atkinson's journey through Ireland during the years 1810 to 1812.

Atkinson was not a wealthy man. During one brief stop in Athlone, he was forced to sell his horse to raise funds since, as he wrote, his family were 'alarmed' by the financial costs that he had incurred in touring Ireland. The horseless Atkinson then proceeded on foot towards Longford. Yet Atkinson's lack of funds may have been to the benefit of his work, since his slow progress through some areas afforded him the opportunity to provide detailed descriptions of particular locations.

For example, Atkinson's book is notable in that the section on Westmeath focusses on Moate. According to Atkinson, Moate's 'industry and improvements have justly procured for it one of the most distinguished positions on the map of this county – its main street, in which a considerable number of good edifices have been erected within the

last fifteen or twenty years, runs about three quarters of a mile, from east to west'.

A time of growth

Atkinson noted that, to the north of Moate's main street, there 'has been erected within the same period, an additional street, called Newmarket, but which is more commonly known by the name of Newtown'. This area contained 'several very respectable dwelling-houses, a sessions-house [court house], a Roman Catholic chapel and convent, a Methodist chapel, and a considerable brewery'. This brewery, owned by John Robinson, was described in contemporary newspapers as occupying more than two acres and it had the capacity to produce thousands of barrels each year.

The period from the late 17th century to the early 18th century was a time of prosperity and expansion in Moate, particularly to the east end of the town. Many of the 'good edifices' admired by Atkinson, and which were likely built by wealthy local manufacturers, still stand. In fact, the modern National Inventory of Architectural Heritage highlights numerous buildings dating from this period along Moate's main street. Apart from homes, Moate contained numerous commercial premises, such as a factory that may have been owned by the Clibborn family, who were active in the local flax industry during the late 18th century.

Such enterprise was applauded by Atkinson, who judged that Moate had 'the advantage' over 'every other town in this county', since 'linen, cotton, and woollen manufactures, are here carried on extensively'. Those businesses provided the proprietors with wealth and gave 'subsistence' to 'hundreds of the labouring poor'. In this respect, Atkinson believed that Moate had an advantage over Athlone, its near neighbour. Athlone had its large barracks and was 'a good commercial town', supplying its garrison and 'a considerable part of the County of Roscommon' with merchandise but it had 'no manufacture of consequence to distinguish it'.

Rivals

Atkinson was impressed by Moate, which he found to be 'remarkable for its cleanliness and public order'. The principal street, he wrote, 'is spacious, and the suburbs, particularly at the east end of the town, will not wound



Between 1750 and 1850, Ireland became a popular destination for the newly emerging tourist industry and sites such as the Lakes of Killarney became internationally famous. Travel writers flocked to the country providing detailed guides to towns such as Moate

human feeling, by the prospect of that filth and wretchedness, which mark the habitations of the poor, in the precincts of many towns in this country of greater magnitude'. In mentioning the poverty evident in larger towns, Atkinson may have been referring to Athlone. Atkinson passed through Athlone, although he spent only enough time there to write about it in 'a very cursory way'.

Nevertheless, he did visit the centre of the town, seeing the bridge and the barracks. In a recent article, we saw how Athlone, during the same decade as Atkinson's journey through Ireland, was home to a large population of destitute people, including women whose husbands were soldiers in the British army. In many cases, those women were left impoverished after their husbands were stationed abroad or died while serving in the army. It seems that many of the destitute women were forced to provide for themselves and their children through prostitution which, as a contemporary resident of Athlone noted, could be seen in all the streets of the town and its vicinity.

Moate did not experience similar circumstances, perhaps because it was not home to a large garrison, instead housing what Atkinson described as a 'temporary barracks' which were 'not always occupied'. During Atkinson's visit, 'the Rutland regiment of militia', containing about 100 men, was stationed in the town. Contemporary military records show that the militia, which originated in the English midlands, was located in Moate between 1811 and 1812. Atkinson believed that the small size of the garrison was potentially detrimental to Moate's development since the 'partial occupancy of the army, furnishes the town with what may be called a very slender and uncertain military trade'.

When considering Westmeath's urban centres, Atkinson judged Mullingar to be a rival to Moate, writing that the two towns covered 'about the same extent of ground; but the former is a more compact and connected town, and can, perhaps, boast of a more numerous population; while the latter is more open, cleanly, and remarkable for modern improvement'. Mullingar's location, however, gave it a number

of advantages: its proximity to the Royal Canal and its distance from what Atkinson believed were its competitors; Kells, Trim, Edenderry, Tullamore, Moate, Ballymahon and Granard.

Moate, on the other hand, stood 'nearly central between the trading towns of Tullamore and Athlone, with which, of course, it has to contend for the inland commerce of the country'. Moate also had to compete for trading and business opportunities with Kilbeggan and Clara, which Atkinson described as 'two towns of inferior importance'.

Indeed, there is a sense in Atkinson's account that Moate was beginning to suffer in comparison to towns such as Mullingar. He noted that 'mail and stage-coaches pass through Moate, but do not lodge there', meaning that the town missed out on the 'larger efflux of passengers' who travelled to and from Dublin on midland and western routes. Yet, despite such challenges, Atkinson offered his hope that Moate's 'rank and position in the county' would continue to 'be as conspicuous and commanding as any other town which the map exhibits'.

