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BALLINCOLLIG: A FUTURE FOR THE PAST

Ballincollig has an asset unique in Ireland, if not in Europe: this is the property of the former Ballincollig Gunpowder Mills which stretches for two miles downstream from Inniscarra Bridge. With several miles of canals, numerous bridges and buildings; the area is ideal for a park and open air museum with potential for numerous recreational and educational purposes.

The industry was set up nearly two hundred years ago during the Napoleonic wars; some years after the end of that conflict the British War Office sold the mills to private enterprise, retaining the military barracks. The mills ceased some seventy years ago, after the Boer War; the National Army took over the barracks from the British in 1922 and still have a garrison there.

Last year the Minister for Defence sold the greater part of the Powder Mills to the Cork County Council, who therefore possess a property, and like of which no other local authority in Ireland or Britain, at least, has. There is no evidence as yet that the Council have any appreciation of the potential of the property despite the fact that on numerous occasions over the last five years I have pointed out its value, verbally and in writing.

In 1972 the Council drew up a development plan for the Ballincollig area, this was adopted without alteration in 1973, the text of this makes no reference to the existence of the Mills which suggests that the planners do not want to know about the Mills; furthermore they have failed so far to carry out urgently needed work on the Inniscarra weirs which is the key to the canal network. Despite this omission of the fundamental feature of the area the Plan has some good provisions for the zoning of the district into sections for various purposes, housing, industrial development and so on.

The population of Ballincollig has increased enormously in the last few years and it is clear that this trend will continue for the foreseeable future. It is clear also that leisure time will be greater in the future, the working week will come down to thirty hours or lower in the next generation or sooner; annual holidays will become longer and the number of public holidays will increase. The population of the Cork area is certain to grow and there will be much greater demand for recreational and leisure facilities, which will have to be of a higher standard than at present as obviously with more money and education people will want more advanced outlets in order to fulfil themselves.

All this has been recognised, if unconsciously by the County Council as manifested last year in their attempt to purchase Fota Island. Whatever strictures I may have on the Council in relation to their lack of policy for the Powder Mills; certainly I have none regarding the case of Fota; they made every effort to secure that splendid property as a public amenity and it is not their fault that the estate was bought by the local branch of a semi-state concern under whose ownership it is likely to be as remote from the public as ever it was with the previous proprietors.

It is in this context that I wish to discuss the Council's zoning proposals for the Brigading Field in Ballincollig. This is a magnificent long, level, wide, open space bounded on the north by Leslie's Canal and on the west by Great Island and on the south by the road to Kerry; with Faversham Square the former Constabulary barracks at the West Village and half way towards the main village the building now known as Oriel Court which was originally built to accommodate the officers of the Powder Mills. A fence running north from Oriel Court divides the part of the Brigading Field acquired by the Council from that still attached to the Barracks. The Brigading Field can, I think be best described as a miniature Curragh of Kildare.

British army used it for manoeuvres by the cavalry, infantry and artillery, and a certain part served as a range for testing the gunpowder produced in the mills.

During the First World War the then fledgling air force used the area and it acquired the name "landing field" which is still sometimes heard. In the 'twenties and 'thirties Sir Alan Cobham brought his flying circus; and until a few years ago the field was regularly used for flying, gliding, parachuting and model aircraft activities. For many years also the area was used for coursing greyhounds and it got the name "coursing field". In the early 'fifties there was a proposal for the setting up of a horse racing track, this however did not succeed because the promoters were unable to obtain a sufficient number of days to justify the outlay necessary on the facilities required. There may very well be a revival of some of these activities and there is the possibility that the Field could lend itself to entirely new forms of sport and recreation.

The land however will not be available if the proposals at present envisaged by the County Council are carried out; these call for the construction of a "residential district and district centre". The area could indeed be used for housing, however the answer to the housing problem is certainly not the straight forward construction of houses on every site which happens to be both suitable and available. The maximum number of houses which could possibly be built in the Brigading Field can only be a very small percentage of the total number of houses in Ballincollig a percentage which must grow smaller for every house built elsewhere in the area.

The Brigading Field situated where it is by the river, canals and mills and adjacent to the road is far more valuable as an amenity than any other area ten times its size in many other districts.

The Brigading Field should be preserved as a basically open area; housing and other developments should be directed towards the south and west of the town as already provided for in the Plan. It would appear to be the intention of the planners to keep the general profile of the valley as open as possible to judge by the areas to the north and north west which are scheduled for preservation as they are; but the area immediately east of the mills is zoned for another "residential district and district centre". The development of the "residential districts and district centres" would be jarring intrusions on this concept as well as depriving the valley of areas which once built on could never be restored. There is a proposal at present for the setting up of playing pitches in the eleven acre field enclosed by Waltham Abbey Row, Coopers Row and the Charge Houses. I feel that the major sports facilities should be developed by the various clubs in co-operation with the community school in the part of the Brigading field near Oriel Court.

The eleven acre field at "Blanco" as that area is known is not suitable for more than a casual game. The Charge Houses and the Incorporating Mills would be the ideal site for the museum which I have so long advocated. Crowds of any size will inevitably lead to vandalism; moreover this section of the mills is highly, I should say deeply, dangerous, as there are many channels full of water in which children and adults could easily drown. The whole area of the mills, is perilous, the canals are treacherous and the buildings are rather derelict. I have had several narrow escapes over the years and would advise anyone to keep away until the dangers have been dealt with.

Ballincollig could be developed into the envy of the country if not of the continent, if vigilance is exercised in the district and imagination in the County Hall.

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The writer is a member of the Cork County National Monuments Advisory Committee, and of several historical societies and local organisations. He has a life long interest in the heritage of the area and hopes to publish the history of the Powder Mills later on; and would be glad to hear from readers with old photos, documents and other items connected with the district, or of other historical interest.