

THE KILKENNY MARBLE WORKS

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THE story of the Kilkenny Marble Works begins in 1730, when William Colles, of Patrick Street, Kilkenny, and Abbey Vale, started one of the finest private industries that ever flourished in this country. The Marble Works is situated at Abbey Vale, in the parish of Blackrath, now called Maddockstown, three miles from the city of Kilkenny, on the left bank of the River Nore. We learn from local tradition that the premises known as the Middle Mill was not built by the Colles family. It existed long before they came there, being built and used as a grain mill by Monks who lived in an Abbey nearby, giving to the district the names of Abbey Vale and the Long Abbey, though no trace of the Abbey now remains. These Monks were connected with a monastery in Burnchurch. The warehouses or polishing sheds were built by William Colles, who started the industry. The lower mill was built by William Colles, grandson of the founder of the business, and used as a factory for making paper from linen rags. The ruins of another mill can be seen below the paper factory, this was a grain mill, and acquired by the Colles family in later years.

The Colles family were connected with this industry for just 200 years—1730 to 1920. The earliest account of the Colles family is at Leigh in Worcester, as early as the 13th century. The name was first spelled Colle and later Coley, and Coleys about 1240. It was in the reign of Henry VI that the inter-marriage between the Purefoys and the ancestor of the Irish family of Colles took place.

“William Colles, of Doughill, near Athlone, born 1585, came originally to Ireland as secretary to Lord Harrington, whence returning to England, he engaged his uncle, Sir Roger Purefoy, whose heir he was, together with eight other gentlemen and 20 yeomen of Coleshill and Coldescote and of Drayton, in the County of Leicestershire, to follow him into Ireland, where, after a variety of fortune, he died in 1621.”

His son, Job, served under Gustavus Adolphus, and was wounded in the Battle of Leipzig in 1631. The King of Sweden presented him with a silver hilted sword (of which further mention will be made later). Job Colles wrote a history of his family in which he mentioned “the old Colles Ghost.” The story is not set out so I cannot tell you of it. William Colles, of Doughill, also had another son, William Colles, who became a merchant of Skinner Row, Dublin, as well as a son, Charles Colles, of Magheramore, Co. Sligo, who was said to have served in the Cromwellian Army,

and got a large grant of lands in Sligo, Wexford and Kilkenny, 2,296 Irish acres in all.

William Colles, the merchant of Dublin, had a son, William Colles, who became a surgeon, and having practised and travelled extensively in England, acquired considerable landed property in Co. Kilkenny, Kincullen and Lisnatunshin, some of which passed to the Meredyth family by the marriage of his grand-daughter, Susan Colles. William Colles, the surgeon, was a remarkable man in many ways. He is said to have had his portrait painted every seven years to remind him of "the lapse of life." One dated 1714 was formerly at Millmount. Amongst other adventures he was once imprisoned in the Caves of Dunmore by his enemies. His son, William Colles, of Abbey Vale, born 1702, died 1770, who founded the Marble Works, married Susan Wheeler alias Hull, widow of Lieut. Robert Wheeler, and had two sons, William and Christopher, who both died young; they also had one daughter, Hanna, born 1729, who married her first cousin, Christopher James, of The Rock, Kilkenny. William of Abbey Vale's first wife died in 1738, and later he, in 1743, married Rachel, a servant, of Dublin, by whom he had Barry, William of Millmount, John and Isaac. William Colles, of Abbey Vale, was a man of universal talent, pre-eminent as a mathematician and mechanic, but with the exception of the mills on the River Nore for cutting and polishing marble, few of his inventions became profitable to his family. The local people regarded (and in 1818 still mentioned) him as a necromancer. St. John's Bridge in Kilkenny, of great beauty, was built by him, and some remains of fine architectural pieces prove the universality of his genius. In early life he had some pretensions as a poet and wrote several tragedies. He was the inventor of the machinery for sawing, boring and polishing marble, and was acknowledged to be the first person (at least in modern times) to apply power to that manufacture, all the processes having previously been performed by hand. An example of the kind of works to which boring was applied may be seen in the form of down-pipes at a house on Usher's Quay, Dublin, about five doors from Ganley's Wool Mart.

The Department of Science and Art have also secured some lengths of pipe and a hopper head for the Museum in Kildare Street. The pipes were bored by a machine invented for the purpose, which was probably very similar to the rock drills at present in use. Several lengths of water pipe, externally about seven inches square, set as steps to doors, may be seen in Kilkenny, though probably no one there now knows (i.e. 1927) for what purpose they were originally intended. This William was an Alderman and twice Mayor of Kilkenny. There is a note of him having in May, 1751, sold a plot of ground fronting the Parade, suitable for building a theatre on, to a Mr. Sheridan, Manager of

the Theatre, Dublin. In Mr. William Tighe, of Woodstock's Book 1802: "The Machinery of the Marble Mill was the invention of Ald. William Colles (grandfather of the present proprietor). He first tried a model in a small stream, and finding it succeeded, took a perpetual lease of the well-known Marble Quarry near Kilkenny in 1730. He was a man of great mechanical abilities and astounding in variety of eccentric schemes such as mark original genius, one of which was an attempt to make dogs weave linen by turning wheels, another the supplying the Corporation of Dublin with bored marble tubes as pipes for distributing water through the city which was defeated only by a combination of pump borers and other mechanics who rose in a mob and destroyed them on their arrival, while he amused the populace by various devices such as that of a musical instrument resembling an Aolian Harp, which played by itself as it floated on the stream of the river, and many others. He applied himself as well to the construction of useful machinery for different purposes and invented, amongst others, a cider mill, a water engine and an engine for dressing flax, simple and efficacious, though now superseded. In "A Tour of Ireland" by two Englishmen, published in London in 1748, it is said: Near the mill are apartments called warehouses where you may see such diversity of chimney pieces, cisterns, buffets, vases, punch-bowls, mugs of different sizes, frames for looking glasses and pictures, etc., that they would employ the eye the longest day and yet find something to admire. The working of the smaller articles is now abandoned as are also many of the contrivances of the inventor. The marble is fully as durable and bears as fine a polish as any brought from Italy. Though the stone in this quarry sometimes might weigh several tons, yet the method the contriver has used to lift them, draw them out and convey them to the mill without any other than manual operation adds still more to the surprise. I am informed that this ingenious gentleman sends yearly several shiploads to England which gives me a particular satisfaction that they may find a native of Ireland had outdone all they had hitherto seen. I cannot hear that anyone has attempted to imitate the machinery. It is perpetually at work, by night as well as by day, and requires little attendance.

In the year 1775, £10,000 was granted by the Government to start work on the Canal between Kilkenny and Inistioge, and Alderman Colles delivered a proposal for supplying the Commissioners with stone and other minerals for building their first lock upon the following terms: Hewn stone raised and cut and the beds and ends wrought true to the square, and chiselled six inches in from the face, delivered at the lock where they are to be used and set, and a skilful person to set the said hewn stones, the Commissioners finding labourers for setting the stones at twenty pence per foot superficial, the faces only to be measured—rough stone for

building the backing of the locks, and for raising and carriage to the lock, at one shilling per perch of 21 feet long, 18 inches thick, and one foot high; roche lime at eighteen pence per barrel, to be measured at the kiln and delivered at the works. The hewn stone to be in the bed 18 inches or more in some parts, and no part less than 12 inches, which proposal is agreed to by and between the Board and the said William Colles." He was also paid the sum of £8 13s. 9½d. in compensation for three thatched houses on part of his property, which had to be pulled down to make way for the Canal. One of the pay clerks appointed by the Commissioners was a Mr. Christopher Colles. Many of the Canal locks can still be seen in a good state of preservation though the Canal was never completed. It only reached from the city to Bennettsbridge when the Government having granted £18,000 refused to grant any more money. William Colles, of Abbey Vale, died in 1770. The monument to his memory which is against the exterior of the West Wall of the South transept of St. Mary's, was composed by his nephew, Dr Jacob, Archdeacon of Armagh. He left his son, William of Millmount, the silver hilted sword (before referred to) of Gustavus Adolphus whereupon he had the hilt of the sword made into a pair of silver buckles. Later, his son, Richard of River View, had the silver buckles made into a snuff box. He was succeeded by his son, William of Millmount, born in 1745, and educated at the Quaker School at Ballitore (after Edmund Burke had left). Millmount was built in 1770, and he married in 1771, Mary Anne Bates, of Co. Wexford, and had three sons. He died in 1779, aged 34 years, and was buried at Ballitore as he was a Quaker. An extract from Finn's Leinster Journal says—12th June, 1775: "Last Monday morning, Thomas Adderley, a workman belonging to Mr. Colles's Marble Works, went to the river for a pail of water, when the pail slipping from him and endeavouring to recover it he fell in and was unfortunately drowned."

William of Millmount's second son became a noted surgeon.

His son, William, died unmarried in 1849, at Millmount. He was a friend of Daniel O'Connell. He established the paper factory before referred to at Maddoxtown. It was quite successful but only lasted until paper-making machinery made it uneconomic.

Here is another extract from Finn's Leinster Journal—Jan. 29, 1785: "Marble Mills near Kilkenny. For sale, a large assortment of Kilkenny Marble Chimney Pieces of the newest kinds of Italian and Kilkenny Marble, finished in the best manner, which will be sold on the very lowest terms. Stone cutters or any persons who want a number of chimney pieces will find their account in dealing at said Mills by applying to Mary Anne Colles, near Kilkenny, who carries on the Marble business in the most extensive manner." In 1795, Richard Colles of Riverview, third son of William

of Millmount, took on the Marble business. He built Riverview, now Lavistown, in 1810.

Mr. William Tighe, before referred to, says of him: "The most important Quarry in the limestone district is that which produces Kilkenny marble. It is called the Black Quarry and lies half a mile to the South of the town. This stone when polished has a black ground marked with a great variety of shells. The dressing of the rough blocks and some coarse works is carried out at the quarry, but the principal work is done at the Marble Mill, by means of which the marble is so easily wrought as to be sold at a very moderate price. The mill, which both saws and polishes is remarkable for the simplicity of its structure and for the power it exerts, it may fairly be said to do the work of 42 men daily. Water is never wanting, and from the goodness of its structure it is scarce ever stopped on account of repairs. The importation of marble in a finished state into England and Scotland has been hitherto prevented by the duty of two shillings the foot, what is exported therefore is the rude block. The blocks are principally consigned to Liverpool and Glasgow and in return Mr. Colles sometimes takes white Carrara Marble at the former place, which he works up at Kilkenny into handsome and highly priced chimney pieces, generally inlaid with coloured stones and adorned with sculptures in relief. Mr. Colles is extremely attentive to the business which seems in a very thriving state and wants nothing but the passage of a canal through Kilkenny to increase it."

The business prospered all through the duration of the war with France more especially from the time when Napoleon enforced a general blockade, with the object of ruining British commerce. The blockade gave Richard his opportunity as it had the effect of keeping foreign marbles from reaching Great Britain. When peace came and the blockade ended foreign marbles again competed with Kilkenny marble. In addition the failure of the harvest in Ireland in 1817 caused famine and there was also general trade depression and political unrest which all made trading difficult, though about this time there were 22 flour mills on the Nore between Durrrow and Inistioge, three large distilleries (one opposite the marble works); and four breweries.

Richard Colles of Riverview died in 1849, aged 75 years, and was buried at Maddoxtown. His second son, Alexander, born in 1815, was a land agent and also an agent for Mark Monserrat, wine merchant, whose daughter he married in 1841. He went to live with William Colles at Millmount in 1843. He took up the marble business in 1852 which had been practically derelict since his father's death in 1849. He acquired additional water power, modern machinery and a fine staff of skilled workmen, and built up a large and lucrative trade with all parts of the world. Although in 1858 the duty was taken off foreign marbles entering the United Kingdom

the effect was not fully felt until 1876. Richard Colles, his eldest child, helped him on leaving school in 1862. Alexander Colles was Mayor of Kilkenny in 1863 when the Fair Green and Market were acquired and enclosed. He erected the Market gates, on a pillar of which is a slab recording the fact. Alexander Colles was succeeded by his son, Richard, on his death in 1876, who sold the works and retired in 1920, thus severing their connection with the Kilkenny Marble Works after nearly 200 years. During that time they supplied marblework to almost every building of note which was erected in those days. I think the most beautiful example may be seen in the marble pavement of the Chancel of St. Canice's Cathedral, which is greatly admired. In more recent years the Kilkenny Marble Works did splendid work at Trinity College and at the new G.P.O., Dublin.

In time the Colles family acquired Marble quarries in different parts of Ireland and Sir Thomas Deane, R.H.A., the eminent architect, says: "As to marble, where can you find greater variety in colour or more beautiful stone than in Ireland?—black, green, red, grey and every possible shade. I know the marble of Italy, and with the exception of those which are very costly, none can be compared to the Irish marbles."

The marble works was carried on for some time by the new owners who eventually discontinued the business. So ends the story of what was once a famous industry, which was a great loss to the country and particularly to the highly skilled and trained men who worked it.

