



History of Delamont Estate

The Delamont Estate lies at the south west corner of Strangford Lough in the Barony of Dufferin (anciently named Dubthrain, or Black Third or District) and in the townland of Mullagh meaning hilltop.

The earliest settlement on the state is the rath, just to the south of the house at the end of the long terrace. These raths or “Danes Forts” or “Fairy Forts” as they are sometimes locally known were early farmsteads. They were not forts in the usual sense of the word, but they did afford their occupants protection from wild animals and local intruders. The rath at Delamont, being sited on the hill, would have afforded its occupants wide prospects over the surrounding area. It has not been excavated, but is thought to date from 600 to 1100 AD.

By the late 16th, early 17th centuries much of County Down had been acquired by Scottish and English Landlords such as the Hamiltons and Montgomerys. They in turn settled the area with tenant farmers, Scots in the north east and English in the rest, while the native Irish were relegated to the less fertile areas. These early settlers were required to build fortified dwelling houses or bawns, and in the Thomas Raven maps of 1625 there appears a substantial one and a half storey stone house with a wall around it on approximately the same site as the present Delamont House.

This house was approached by a long tree lined avenue, which does not correspond with the line of the present avenue. The house was also on a hilltop, appearing to lie surrounded by a deer park. The land at the time was in the ownership of the “Viscount Clandeboye”, and his tenants must have been quite substantial farmers to have afforded such a large house.

The association of the Gordon family with Delamont begins in the last decade of the 18th Century. The Gordons were originally of Scottish extraction and the Delamont branch seems to have sprung from one Robert Gordon who settled at the end of the 17th Century at Ballinteggart in the Parish of Aghaderg, (Loughbrickland, County Down).

Whether Delamont was actually purchased by the Gordons or acquired by marriage is unclear, but their other estate in County Down, Florida Manor at Killinchy, was acquired through the fortuitous marriage of Robert Gordon to Alice Arbuckle in 1755 who was niece and heiress-in-law to David Crawford of Florida Manor. It is thought that their son, David Gordon (1759 – 1837) first came into Delamont in 1793. Unlike his father and grandfather who were Wine and General Merchants, he entered the legal profession and also established the Banking House of “Gordon and Company” in 1808, which later became the Belfast Banking Company.

David Gordon married Miss Mary Crawford of Crawfordsburn in 1789, who was by all accounts a very wealthy lady. It is unknown if there was a house still standing on the site when he acquired the property but it is likely that he would either have built a house or improved and added to any existing structure. The first Ordnance Survey map of 1835, two years before his death, shows a square house on the site with many of the more important features of the state having been established such as the avenue, Nut Wood, the planting immediately around the house and along the estate wall as far as the stream.

David Gordon had two sons. The eldest Robert Gordon (1791 – 1864), inherited Florida Manor and his second son, the Reverend James Crawford Gordon (1796 – 1867) inherited Delamont, and - on the death of Robert, who had no children - Florida Manor. He was the Precentor (Choirmaster) of St Patrick's Cathedral, County Down; and married Geraldine, daughter of James Penrose, of Woodhill, County Cork.

This early Victorian period saw most of the major developments and improvements to the estate. In 1841 the Reverend James Crawford substantially extended the farm buildings and planted a second avenue to service the farm, orchard and walled garden. A second gate lodge was built and is known as the "Gardners Cottage". He also improved the main entrance to the estate. Much of the planting of Delamont was carried out in the years between David Gordon's death and 1859 (the date of the second Ordnance Survey map), most notably Kinnegar Wood and the two wooded hilltops, the "Corbally Planting" and the "Ringwood Planting". Gibbs Island was also planted and the wooded area round the house extended.

It would appear that the form of the present house also dates from this period. It is built in a mildly Tudor Revival style, but the architect is unknown. The formal terraced gardens were laid out at the same time and provide an integral link between the house and the landscape beyond, carefully leading the eye down through the various levels and making full use of the superb natural setting. The main terrace directly in front of the house was graveled, with the others kept as lawn. The flower beds at the front of house and to the side would have been planted with seasonal bedding plants. There was a rose garden.

Two estate maps exist for 1861 and 1868, showing that the estate was considerably larger than at the present day. The land extended west of the Downpatrick Road and Island Road, and in "Griffiths Valuation of 1863" the Reverend James Crawford Gordon held the land in the townland of Tullykin as well as Mullagh. He also held the right of collecting and taking seaweed from the shore.

The Reverend James Gordon died in 1867, and having no children, the estates of Florida Manor and Delamont passed to his first cousin, Robert Francis Gordon, DLJP (1802 – 1883), son of Alexander Gordon and Dorothea Gisborne. He apparently altered the house in 1875.

He remained a bachelor, and on his death in 1883 the two estates were divided. Florida Manor was left to one nephew, Alexander Frederick St John Gordon (1852 – 1886) and Delamont to another nephew, Alexander Hamilton Miller Haven Gordon (1842 – 1910). However, the nephew who inherited Florida Manor died without issue and so Florida passed back to Alexander Hamilton Miller Haven. Thus the two estates were again united in the Gordon family.

This late Victorian period at Delamont was when the Long Avenue was planted as it does not appear on the 1856 Estate Map, but it features on the Ordnance Survey Map of 1903. Alexander Gordon appears to have taken an active interest in his estate, and his obituary in 1910 describes him as a man "naturally attracted to the necessity for cultivating the soil in an agricultural country like Ireland. He was foremost in promoting any effort to introduce modern improvements and was himself an extensive farmer, both at Delamont and Florida Manor."

Alexander Gordon sold Florida Manor in 1910 to a Mr Shields of Bangor, and Delamont passed to his eldest son, Sir Alexander Robert Gisborne Gordon, PG (NI 1951), BGE (1965), CBE (1949), DSO (1917), DL (1882 – 1967). Sir Alexander was MP for East Down from 1919 to 1949 and was Minister for Northern Ireland and Leader of the Senate from 1951 to 1967. He married his first cousin, Alice Mary Dorothea Gordon, in 1914, and was knighted in 1964 by Harold Wilson.

Up until the time of the Second World War the estate seems to have flourished. His Land Steward, a Mr Carlisle, developed the farm and improved the land. Fruit and vegetables from the walled garden were sold, and Mr Moreland, who was employed as gardener in the 1920s, remembers half an acre devoted purely to rhubarb! At that time the estate employed five indoor servants plus a chauffeur, whose duties included carrying drinking water twice a day from a well by Kinnegar Wood up the hill to the house. Eventually water was pumped up the hill and stored in a reservoir built on top of the rath. Delamont appears to have been quite self sufficient in those days, including generating its own electricity.

Sir Alexander made alterations to the house at the back by demolishing some of the sixteen servant's rooms which were no longer used. He also altered the porch in about 1938.

Like so many of his ancestors, Sir Alexander died childless in 1967, and Delamont was held in trust by his niece, Patricia Lillas, for her son, Archibald Arundel Pugh, who assumed the additional surname of Gordon by Deed Poll in 1968. When they took up residence at Delamont in 1968 they had the house altered and modernised by the architect Arthur Jury. They pulled down the remaining buildings around the backyard and connected the house to water mains and electricity. To keep maintenance costs down they ceased using the front avenue and approached the house via the back. The farm and the land were let and when their son came into his inheritance he too continued to let the land.

In 1978 Mr Gordon Pugh applied for and obtained outline planning permission for a hotel, marina and associated development along the shore, together with additional approval for a leisure park and golf course over the rest of the estate. The proposals were not implemented but the house was for a period used as a restaurant and hired out for private parties and functions. Sadly, Delamont and the estate were allowed to decline since the early 1970s and they were finally sold by Mr Gordon Pugh in 1985.

Present Estate Ownership

The Delamont Estate is currently in the joint ownership of Down District Council and the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB).

The Belfast Education and Library Board have acquired Delamont House, the adjoining garden, brick outhouses and tennis courts, the stableyard, and the farm buildings. Delamont House is now run as an outdoor education centre by BELB.

The total area of land described as being in BELB ownership is approximately 4.85 ha.

Down District Council owns all the remaining areas within the estate; this is now run as a country park for the use of the general public.