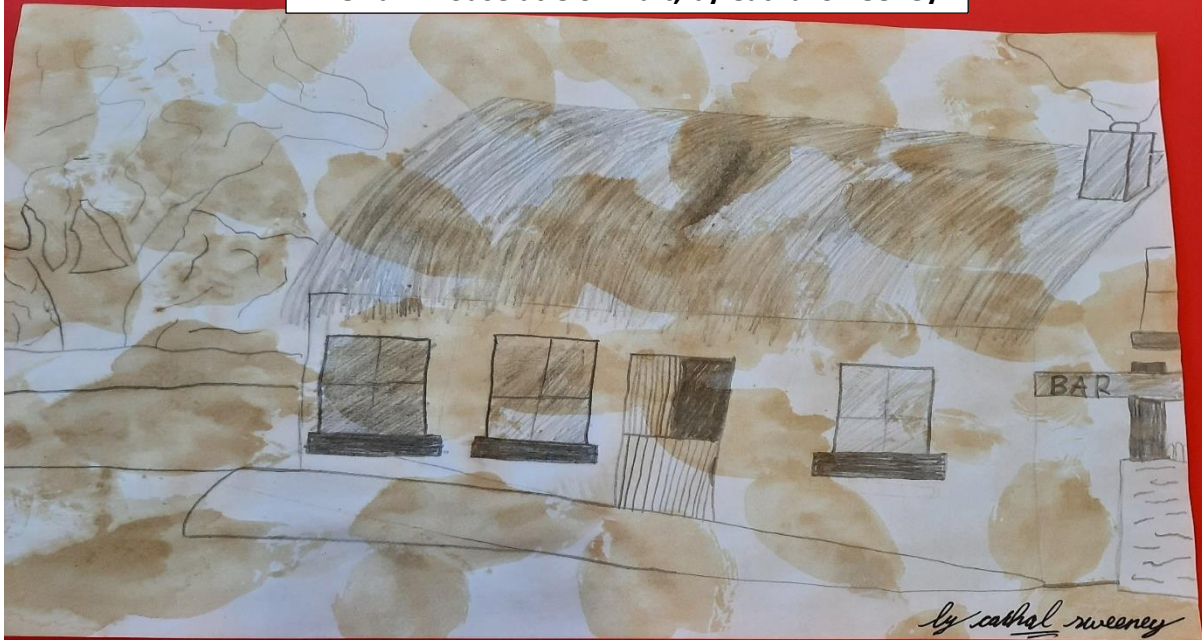


Revolution in Ireland - The Battle of Clonmult

The Farmhouse at Clonmult, by Cathal Sweeney



"At about midday on Sunday, February 20th information was received at Victoria Barracks to the effect that a much wanted rebel and his 'Active Service Unit' were living in a farmhouse in the neighbourhood of Clonmult. It was decided to endeavour to round up this party at once, At two o'clock that afternoon, a party of four officers, and twenty other ranks left Cork for Clonmult, via Middleton R.I.C Barracks" (O'Neill, 2019). What followed that day would be recalled as the worst defeat the I.R.A ever had and effectively wiping out The East Cork Flying Column.

Project by Cathal Sweeney, Ben Fitzgerald, Cathal Power, Kelly Sheehan, Conor Horgan & Keelin O'Leary, 5th Class, Scartleigh National School, Saleen, Midleton, Co. Cork. Technological and formatting assistance and facilitation of project by Múinteoir Triona Casey.

The Establishment of the Fourth Battalion Flying Column

In August 1920, a law was introduced that any man found to be in The IRA would be arrested. This resulted in men fleeing from home to go on the run. These men joined together for safety as they moved from house to house frequently. They relied on the generosity and support of local people. The men were armed and ready to support activities of local IRA groups. These groups of men became known as Flying Columns. (RTE, n.d.)

On August 26th, Comdt. Diarmuid O'Hurley and Joseph Ahern decided to establish The Fourth Battalion Flying Column (The East Cork Flying Column). (Committee, 2021). Like the other Flying Columns, they relied on guerrilla warfare tactics of 'hit and runs' and ambushes. They were brave men and had shown this on many occasions, such as The Midleton Ambush of 1921 and many local successful attacks on nearby RIC barracks.

From August 30th 1920 The Fourth Battalion moved to McGrath's Farmhouse in Knockraha for three weeks. September 21st they moved on to Shanagarry, a distance of 31 km away, for three weeks. From there they moved to Ballymacoda, Ladysbridge and then to Aghada, each for three weeks at a time. They moved to Kilmountain on December 15th. From this base they would launch the ambush of Main Street Midleton. (Committee, 2021). They moved on to Griffins Farmhouse early in the New Year and on January 6th they moved to a disused farmhouse at Garrylaurence, Clonmult. Unusually for them, they would stay here for over 5 weeks. (O'Neill, 2019).

The Midleton Ambush December 29th, 1920

While based in Kilmountain, The East Cork Flying Column was informed that a joint RIC/Black and Tan foot patrol took place each night through the Main Street of Midleton. The decision was taken by Comdt. Diarmuid O'Hurley to attack the patrol on the night of December 29th. (O'Neill, 2019) .

The IRA Volunteers gathered around 8pm on the night, lying in wait in doorways along the main street for the RIC patrol to march through the street. On the patrol's return leg, the IRA made its attack. (Revolution, n.d.) A detailed account of the attack was given by IRA member Patrick (Paddy) Whelan.

"The Patrol was taken completely by surprise and, in comparatively short time, the attack was over. Some of the Tans did fire back at us, and there were a few narrow escapes on our side" (Shiels, n.d.).

An RIC officer and two Black and Tan patrol men died as a result of the Ambush. (Shiels, n.d.). The Midleton Ambush resulted in the first official revenge attack, of The War of Independence. (Revolution, n.d.). On New Year's Day, the British forces set fire to three properties on Main Street, Midleton, as well as to four more homes in the nearby countryside. (Revolution, n.d.) At this time, The Flying Column *"were still possibly at the top of the Crown Forces most wanted list in East Cork and Cork City....The attack on the foot patrol in Midleton on 29th December resulting in the killing of the three RIC constables would only have increased their efforts"* (O'Neill, 2019, p. 28)

The Battle of Clonmult, February 20th, 1921

The disused farmhouse at Garrylaurence, Clonmult was approximately 15 metre long and 5 metres wide, with an outhouse at either end. The accommodation area had three rooms on the ground floor, three windows at the front and one front door. The roof was thatched, and significantly, there was no back door.

Having moved in on January 6th the Column had been staying there for five weeks before the battle. During this time, the men planned and trained for a second attack on Castlemartyr RIC Barracks. The Column was due to move to another house near Leamlara on the night of the Battle, February 20th. The Column had also been instructed to carry out an attack on a train at Cobh Junction on Tuesday, February 22nd.

12pm

At approximately 12 noon, word reached Victoria Barracks that the much wanted after East Cork Flying Column were stationed in Clonmult.

2.15pm

The British Army mobile patrol leave for Clonmult.

2pm - 3pm

- A group, led by Commander of the East Cork Flying Column Diarmuid O'Hurley, left for Cobh Junction to do research work and make a plan to attack a train carrying soldiers and weapons. He took with him his two senior command men, Joseph Ahern and Paddy Whelan. It would be unusual for the three most senior commanders to leave together, but O'Hurley or Ahern knew little about the area of Cobh Junction, but Whelan did, so at short notice they took Paddy Whelan with them. They left Capt. Jack O'Connell in charge. This caused problems in the house, as Capt Paddy Higgins felt he should have been in charge as he was senior to O'Connell.
- The Volunteers in Clonmult were preparing to move to Leamlara that night. Two men were outside on watch duty. However, after a while, the two men left their posts and went inside the house to start packing. Capt. O'Connell had seen the men come in, but didn't do anything about it. (Riordan, 2021)

4pm

- IRA man Dick Hegarty and four local young cyclists arrived at the farmyard. Almost immediately they heard shouts to 'get inside the house for safety' (O'Neill, 2019). Soldiers had just been spotted crawling past the gate. With no one on watch duty, the British soldiers had been able to approach the house unnoticed. (School, n.d.)
- Two Volunteers, John Joe Joyce, a UCC student and great hurler, and Michael Desmond were filling water bottles at the well. Suddenly the British started shooting at them. The volunteers started shooting in retaliation while running back to the farmhouse, but both were mortally wounded. (Site, n.d.) Before he died, John Joe Joyce managed to crawl to the window at the rear of the house, to warn the men that the house was in fact surrounded. (O'Neill, 2019)

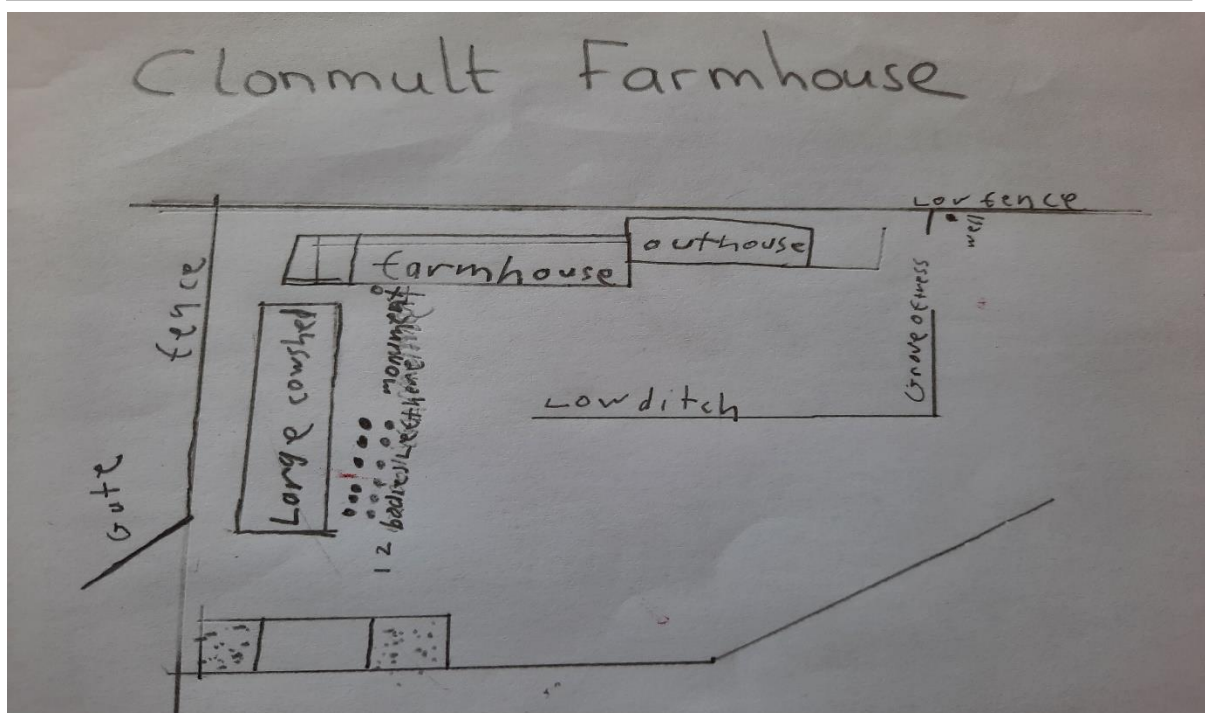
The men faced huge difficulties. With no one on lookout duty, they had been taken completely by surprise. They had a lack of firing positions inside the house. They had a lack of at least one other exit.

'A second exit should have been knocked out of the back wall of the house during their long stay'. "Even a crawl hole would have sufficed" (O'Neill, 2019, p. 42)

Captain Jack O'Connell, the officer in charge, wanted the men to break out quickly through the front door. However Captain Paddy Higgins didn't want this. An argument started between the men, who were already fighting over being in charge of the Column. Only four men decided to make a break out with Capt. O'Connell. The remaining men in the house started firing to give cover, but with only 3 front windows and 1 door, there weren't many places to shoot from.

Captain O'Connell led the breakout. He took the British by surprise. He ran across the farmyard to the gateway and along a track while being fired on. When he looked back, he expected the four men to be following him, but he was alone. Three of The Volunteers running behind him had been shot dead. The last man to make the break, Capt. O'Leary, having seen the other men shot, knew that he couldn't escape and ran back into the house. Five of the Flying Column had by now been killed. Three while making a run and the two men at the well.

Map of Farmhouse showing O'Connell's escape route by Kelly Sheehan



Back in the house, Capt. Paddy Higgins was now in charge. He decided to continue the fight from inside the house. The men used Bayonets, knives and forks to create a hole in the wall. Capt. O'Leary (the 5th man to make the run) managed to crawl out through the hole but was seen by a British soldier and was shot in the head. He was pulled back inside and fell unconscious. The British were calling on the Volunteers to surrender, but they did not as they believed that they would be executed if they did.

The British soldiers believed that they did not have enough men to take control of the house and sent two soldiers to Midleton to get reinforcements.

5.20pm

24 Auxiliaries arrived with petrol and grenades and without delay the thatch roof was set on fire. (O'Neill, 2019) The Auxiliaries were British officers who had fought in WW1.

British soldier, Lt. Hammond, who climbed onto the roof to set it on fire "at great personal risk", was later awarded an OBE for his 'act of bravery'. (Records, n.d.)

Meanwhile, the men inside the farmhouse knew that they would not survive the fire. A British Army Officer gave his promise that their lives would be saved if they surrendered.

5.40pm approx.

15 minutes after the fire started the men surrendered. Twelve men walked out of the house. One man fell to the ground after being hit in the head by an Auxiliary's rifle. The other men were lined up by the cowshed with their hands up. The Auxiliaries opened fire, killing seven of the twelve prisoners. The four young cyclists were among the survivors, though three of them had been wounded. The arrival of a British Officer stopped the Auxiliaries shooting. Two men were delayed leaving the house as they tried to help Capt. O'Leary, who had been shot in the head. As these men had seen the shooting, they stayed inside until the British officer had stopped the killing. (O'Neill, 2019). In the end, 12 men lay dead, 8 were taken prisoner, and 1 man, Jack O'Connell had escaped. At around mid-midnight O'Connell and the Three Commanding officers who had left that morning returned to find the heart breaking sight at Clonmult.

Epilogue by Cathal Sweeney

My Nannie's father, William Meade, was from Garylaurence, Clonmult. He was an IRA Volunteer in The Fourth Battalion, First Cork Brigade. On December 29th, 1920 he took part in the successful Midleton Ambush. A battle which resulted in death of one RIC soldier and two Black and Tans. The Black and Tans were ex-soldiers from WW1, who had been sent to Ireland in 1920 by Winston Churchill. For many years I have heard the stories of my Great Grandfather, the Volunteers and their fight for Independence.

The Volunteers had lots of success in the time before Clonmult. However the loss in Clonmult where the entire Flying Column was nearly wiped out, was a huge blow to the IRA.

The East Cork Flying Column were brave men, however they were not soldiers, they were Volunteers and mistakes were made in the lead up to The Battle of Clonmult. After many successes including attacks on RIC Barracks and The Midleton Ambush, the Volunteers had become over-confident. For example, some of the men went to local pubs on the day of the attack, and the men on sentry duty left their posts when they should have been on look-out.

By not moving house for 5 weeks they had let themselves trapped in Clonmult and at huge risk of being spotted. They didn't have a crawl hole in the back wall to escape and the house had a thatched roof. They didn't have any firing points to defend Clonmult. Their top three men were at Cobh Junction at the time of the attack and this led to arguing, and in the end, led to bloodshed. After The Flying Column killing 3 British military men in Midleton in December, they should have been more prepared for a revenge attack. Despite the failures at Clonmult, The East Cork Flying Column were successful fighters, and proof of this is that they were the most wanted Flying Column in Cork at the time. The young men of Clonmult will never be forgotten.

The End

Sources and photos of our research

This poem is included in our sources as we feel it sums up our great Cork Heroes.

The Lament of Clonmult, by Maurice O'Connor

On the 20th day of February, 1921,
It's the day when Ireland lost too many sons,
The Fourth Battalion East Cork Brigade,
In Clonmult they were betrayed. Spotted by an English Spy,
Enemies surrounded the house where the boys did lie,

Ireland lost 14 in all, The men who answered Ireland's call,
What a loss of Irish sons,
When those brave men fell on their guns.

Two lads lost straight away, cut down by the fatal spray,
Four Volunteers rushed out the door,
This attempt did cost three more.

With the roof a blaze, Their hands they raised,
Out they came in good faith,
Shot down by the ones in wait,
The Tans they went on a killing spree,
More were killed in this melee, Survivors taken to jail in Cork,
Imprisonment for them was fairly short,
Sentenced to a firing squad,
Two more heroes sent to God.



Researching the project

Working on the final timeline for the day of the Battle



Presenting the Project to the class, with the help of class mate Chloe Kennelly, Greatgrand niece of Richard Hegarty.



L to R: Keelin O'Leary as The Principal, Chloe Keneally as Richard Hegarty, Kelly Sheehan as The Múinteoir, Cathal Sweeney as Michael Collins- the Sub-Teacher!, Cathal Power as Jack O'Connell, Conor Horgan as Paddy Higgins and Ben Fitzgerald as Diarmuid O'Hurley.

06/04/2022

Link to the video of the drama <https://drive.google.com/file/d/16-EoP05P4h7iIRIAghY4xmCl-irCaapV/view?usp=sharing>

BLACK & TANS



"The Black and Tans were ex-soldiers from WW1, who had been sent to Ireland in 1920 by Winston Churchill," Cathal Sweeney.

I. R. A
VOLUNTEER

*by cathal
sweeney*



*Paying respects at Clonmult Memorial Graveside,
March 2022.*



Sources

Books

- Battle of Clonmult, Commemorative Journal. Cork County Council and UCC 2021
- The Battle of Clonmult, The IRA'S worst Defeat by Tom O'Neill, The History Press, 2019
- The Irish Examiner Newspaper - "Battle of Clonmult marks IRA's biggest loss of life in bloody chapter of War of Independence", by Seán O'Riordan, 21/02/2021
- The Irish Times - "100 years ago today: the Clonmult ambush was the IRA's worst disaster", by R. McGreevy, 20/02/2021

Websites

- Atlas of the Irish Revolution, Resource for Schools, RTE.ie
- British Army Records. www.theauxiliaries.com/incidents/clonmult-1921-feb/clonmult
- <https://www.rte.ie/documents/history/2021/01/u7.-ty-project-book-woi-p.2.pdf>
-
- Clonmult Old School local history www.clonmultoldschool.ie
- Clonmult Ambush Site Facebook Page
- Landscape of Revolution midleton-ambush1920 www.landscapesofrevolution.com
- Midleton Archaeology and Heritage Project www.midletonheritage.com
- RTE.ie/news "100 Years on from the Battle of Clonmult" by Donal Byrne, 19/02/2021
- Nation Wide Clonmult Ambush, RTE Nation Wide on youtube.com <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dc9ufQ8v0AE>

Word count: 1,958