

THE HOUSE 1

The Austin Standard 8 changed everything. The world became a bigger place beyond the end of the street. On that particular Sunday, it must have been about 1960, I visited a place, a house that was to stay with me for the rest of my life. Sunday trips often took us, my father and mother, my younger brother and me, back to my father's home town of Limavady and visits to many uncles and aunts. I believed that they were my uncles and aunts, without actually being told so. At that age, in early teens, everything was believed and everything was simple.



On this particular Sunday the Standard 8 was parked on the Roe Mill Road, in front of a dilapidated cottage which sat on the road edge - no footpath, no front garden, no kerb, vulnerable. The whitewash was old grey and splattered with mud from the passing traffic. Green moss rotted its way up the walls from the ground. The old thatch, rotted and roughly patched, covered the walls down to the tops of the front door and the two windows on the wall next to the road.

My father knocked on the half front door, paint-faded, rotted at the bottom. Rot everywhere. Without waiting for a reply he opened the door. It was as if he had been here before, many times. My mother followed him inside, the way known to her. My younger brother and I timidly slipped in behind and retreated into a corner.

“Hello John, how are you?”

“Hello Harry, how are you?”

No handshakes; only nervousness and awkwardness. I don't remember the conversation; it was adult stuff about illnesses, people dead, people dying. I do remember the shock. I stood in the corner and stared at something I had never seen before. Poverty – brutal, hard, soul destroying poverty. This was 1960, the Dawning of the Age of Aquarius, but the inside of this house was a shift to another time of want, of hunger, of disease, of death.

This old man John was gaunt, emaciated, ill, on both sides of death; my father's brother, my uncle, I thought. The old black and white terrier reflected, as dogs do, the state of its master. The house appeared to have only one room. If there were others I didn't see them as I was so focussed on the earthen floor, with all of the detritus of living ground into it; so focussed on the squalor, on the ancient grease encrusted gas cooker, on the one chair sitting at the side of the cold unlit fire. That chair will be, for me, the everlasting vision of heart breaking loneliness.

No tea was shared. We didn't sit down. We didn't stay long. We came out into the Sunday afternoon summer sun. Across the road was the high long basalt stone wall of the Roe Mill Estate, stretching into Limavady town to the right and following the valley of the River Roe to the left. In the car, on the way home, over the mountain, to Coleraine, nothing was said. Nothing was ever said.

THE HOUSE 2

It is 1970 now. The last ten years were full of work and ambitions, mine and others, which buoyed me through the grandeur of the Coleraine Academical Institution, courtesy of post war education legislation. And then, exceptionally, on to the even greater grandeur of Queen's University Belfast. One, good, solid First Class Honours degree in Civil Engineering and I was ready to change the world, including, ironically, the Roe Mill Road.

I parked the mustard coloured Morris Mini in the compound of huts and offices.

“Good morning Jim. Isn't that a great morning?”

“Yes Joe, it is indeed.”

“It's a great morning for our wee job. Are you ready?”

“Yes Joe , ready.”

Joe was the contractor's site foreman for the reconstruction of the Roe Mill Road. We walked up the site; the estate wall on our right.

“We went ahead and cleared the services. Just water. No electricity. No telephone. And we have already cleared the back garden. I hope you didn't mind us going ahead.”

“No Joe. That's OK. The job has to be done.”

The CAT D4 sat waiting, the huge diesel engine rattling over, the driver leaning back in his seat, smoking a cigarette, with his face turned up to the sun.

“OK?” Joe looked at me.

“OK.”

Joe nodded to the driver. He nodded back, threw down his cigarette. Two great belches of black burnt diesel shot out of the vertical exhaust stack. The gears engaged with a crunch, the great blade rose silently off the ground, under the tons of pressure in the hydraulic rams. The caterpillar tracks clanked forward.

In ten seconds it was gone.

THE HOUSE 3

It is thirty years later now. The millennium year. Again ambition, hard work and ego had propelled me towards a double breasted pin striped suit.

I parked the metallic black 3 Series BMW in the spacious guests' car park and lifted the leather, real leather, briefcase and the leather, real leather, overnight bag, out of the boot.

“Good morning Mr Devenney. Welcome to the Radisson Roe Country Park Hotel. Mr Kennedy, our conference manager has asked to be informed of your arrival.”

Check-in completed. Conference facilities inspected. Final arrangements made. I stood alone in the grand conference suite. From one of the tall, wine velvet curtained windows the view stretched down the meadow to the River Roe, up the meadow on the other side to the Estate wall and behind that the Roe Mill Road and the ghost of the house; and the ghosts of all of those who had lived in it.

I had visited it once and called it squalor.

I had watched while it was levelled to the ground and called it progress.

I looked at it then and called it history.

THE HOUSE 4

It is 2010, ten years later. Retired now, with more of history behind me than there is a future in front of me. Cars don't matter any more. More of a bus pass enthusiast now. In the quiet, darkened microfilm room of the Irish National Archives in Dublin there it is again, recorded as it was in 1911.

CENSUS OF IRELAND, 1911.
Two Examples of the mode of filling up the Tables are given on the other side.

FORM A. No. or Form B. 13

RETURN of the MEMBERS of this FAMILY and their VISITORS, BOARDERS, SERVANTS, &c., who slept or abode in this House on the night of SUNDAY, the 2nd of APRIL, 1911.

NAME AND SURNAME.	RELATION to Head of Family.	RELIGIOUS PROFESSION.	EDUCATION.	AGE (last Birthday) and SEX.		RANK, PROFESSION, OR OCCUPATION.	PARTICULARS AS TO MARRIAGE.			WHERE BORN.	IRISH LANGUAGE.	If Dead and Date of Death, or Date of Birth of Child.
				Male.	Female.		Whether Married, Widowed, or Single.	Completed years the present Marriage has lasted, if less than one year, write "under one."	Children born alive to present Marriage, in column 11.			
Christian Name.	Surname.			Age of Males.	Age of Females.							
1 James	Severnay	Head of Family	Blanch of Irebr...	58		Labourer, bricks	married			do Derry		
2 Ellen	Severnay	Wife	do		49		married	28	10	10	do	
3 John	Severnay	Son	do	25		Railway Porter	single				do	
4 James	Severnay	Son	do	20		Harbour maker	single				do	
5 Samuel	Severnay	Son	do	17		Labourer, bricks	single				do	
6 Robert	Severnay	Son	do	9		Scholar	single				do	
7 William	Severnay	Son	do	7		Scholar	single				do	
8 Charlotte	Severnay	Daughter	do		14		single				do	
9 Genny	Severnay	Daughter	do		11		single				do	
10 William	Severnay	Grand son	do	2							do	
11												
12												
13												
14												
15												

I hereby certify, as required by the Act 10 Edw. VII., and 1 Geo. V., cap 11, that the foregoing Return is correct, according to the best of my knowledge and belief.

I believe the foregoing to be a true Return.

James S. Severnay
Mark Wilkins
Seamell Grant

Signature of Head of Family.

Seamell Grant
Signature of Enumerator.

"Of brick build with a thatched roof, 3 rooms, 3rd class."

Ten people living there. My people.

“James Devenny, Head of Family, Church of Ireland, Cannot Read, Labourer.

Ellen Devenny, Wife, Church of Ireland, Read.

John Devenny, Son, Church of Ireland, Read and Write, Railway Porter.”

Six other siblings.”

And finally my father

“William Devenny, Grand Son, Church of Ireland, age 2.”

William Devenny, later to be known as Harry.

So he was my Great Uncle John.

What do I call the house now – history?

My history – the stuff of memories and memoirs.

I wish I had treated it with more respect.

I wish I had paid more attention.