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THE FOUNDER OF MODERN BELFAST

Sir Arthur Chichester, founder of Belfast, has his effigy in St Nicholas's church in Carrickfergus. Chichester was always closely concerned about Carrickfergus, and the house he built there for his retirement was a splendid one, Joymount, named after his patron, Mountjoy.

PHOTOGRAPH: CARNEGIE, 2009

CHAPTER TWO

Founding fathers

Where Essex had failed in the 1570s, a later adventurer succeeded. In the interval, the balance of power in Ireland was transformed by the decisive victory of Elizabeth's armies over the Irish (and Anglo-Irish) lords who had so long defied her. Nowhere was the change greater than in Ulster, where the gaelic rulers had remained largely independent until Elizabeth was on her deathbed. The leading figure on the Irish side in this end-game of the Tudor conquest was Hugh O'Neill, second earl of Tyrone, whose military and diplomatic skills and commanding presence enabled him to persuade former rivals to accept his leadership and to recruit the assistance (though in the end not in sufficient strength) of the pope and the king of Spain – and to carry on, with some notable successes in the field, a war lasting nine years off and on. In the end, after Elizabeth's young favourite Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex, had failed as miserably as his father (more so indeed, for he lost his head as a consequence), the Irish were overcome by the superior abilities and ruthless scorched-earth tactics of Charles Blount, Lord Mountjoy and his equally ruthless right-hand man in the north, Arthur Chichester.

The crucial event in the defeat of the hitherto victorious Irish was the battle of Kinsale in December 1601. A Spanish force which had mistakenly landed there, far from the main centre of events, was besieged by Mountjoy's army, which was besieged in turn by O'Neill on his arrival from the north. Ambitious plans to destroy the English in a combined assault by the Spaniards and the Irish misfired, however. Forced to retreat back again to Ulster, O'Neill found his allies deserting him and was eventually forced to submit to Mountjoy at the end of March 1603, unaware that the Queen was already dead; had he known, he might have hoped to negotiate better terms from her successor, James VI and I.[1]

As it was, O'Neill and other leading rebels were treated with what at first glance looks like considerable leniency, in that large parts of their confiscated estates were restored to them, but – no longer their own masters – they had to admit English sheriffs and garrisons and use English law. Their lands 'before these last wars, like the kingdom of China, inaccessible to strangers', were thus laid open for exploitation.

The words quoted above were those of Arthur Chichester, the founding father of modern Belfast.[2]

Chichester was not the first of his family to seek his fortune in Ireland. An elder brother, John, who had served in the army there from 1595, had been appointed governor of Carrickfergus and was knighted for his services. In July 1597 he defeated the local allies of O'Neill, overcoming their thousand-strong force with his own much smaller contingent (250 foot and 30 horse). Belfast Castle, however, which had earlier 'cost some money in fortefying', had been taken by Shane McBrian O'Neill on 18 June 1597 (when the officer in command was drunk in Carrickfergus) and all the Englishmen in the garrison had been hanged and disembowelled. A short time later, Sir John Chichester recaptured the castle in a surprise attack from the sea. So complete was the surprise that there were no English casualties; and this time the Irish within were put to the sword. The official report to the authorities described Belfast at that time as 'a place which standeth 8 miles from Kerogfergus, and on the river, wher the sea ebbes and flowes, so that botes may be landed within a butte [crossbow] shotte of the said Castell'. Flushed by these easy successes, in November 1597 Chichester sallied forth from Carrickfergus to offer battle to a large and seasoned force of Scots from north Antrim who were menacing the town. The result was a complete disaster. The Scots, led by Sir James MacDonnell, caught the English in a well-laid ambush and not only inflicted heavy casualties on them but captured and killed the governor himself, afterwards beheading the corpse and sending the grisly trophy to Hugh O'Neill's camp, where it was reportedly kicked about like a football.[3]

ARTHUR CHICHESTER

A seventeenth-century engraving of Sir Arthur Chichester (1563–1625), founder of Belfast and Lord Deputy of Ireland for more than ten years.

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When Arthur Chichester came to Ireland in 1599 he followed in his brother's footsteps, determined not only to make his own name and fortune but if possible to avenge the late governor (whom he succeeded in that post) by destroying MacDonnell and O'Neill. Before the Nine Years War ended in 1603 the Scot was dead, possibly assassinated on the orders of Chichester (or at any rate with his approval). O'Neill proved to be beyond his reach however, despite earlier hopes of 'soon beheading that wood-kerne Tyrone'.[4] Thereafter, O'Neill's decision in 1607 to leave Ireland, in the so-called Flight of the Earls, literally removed him from Chichester's sphere of influence. The departure of the great northern chiefs led to the confiscation of their property and the official plantation of Ulster.

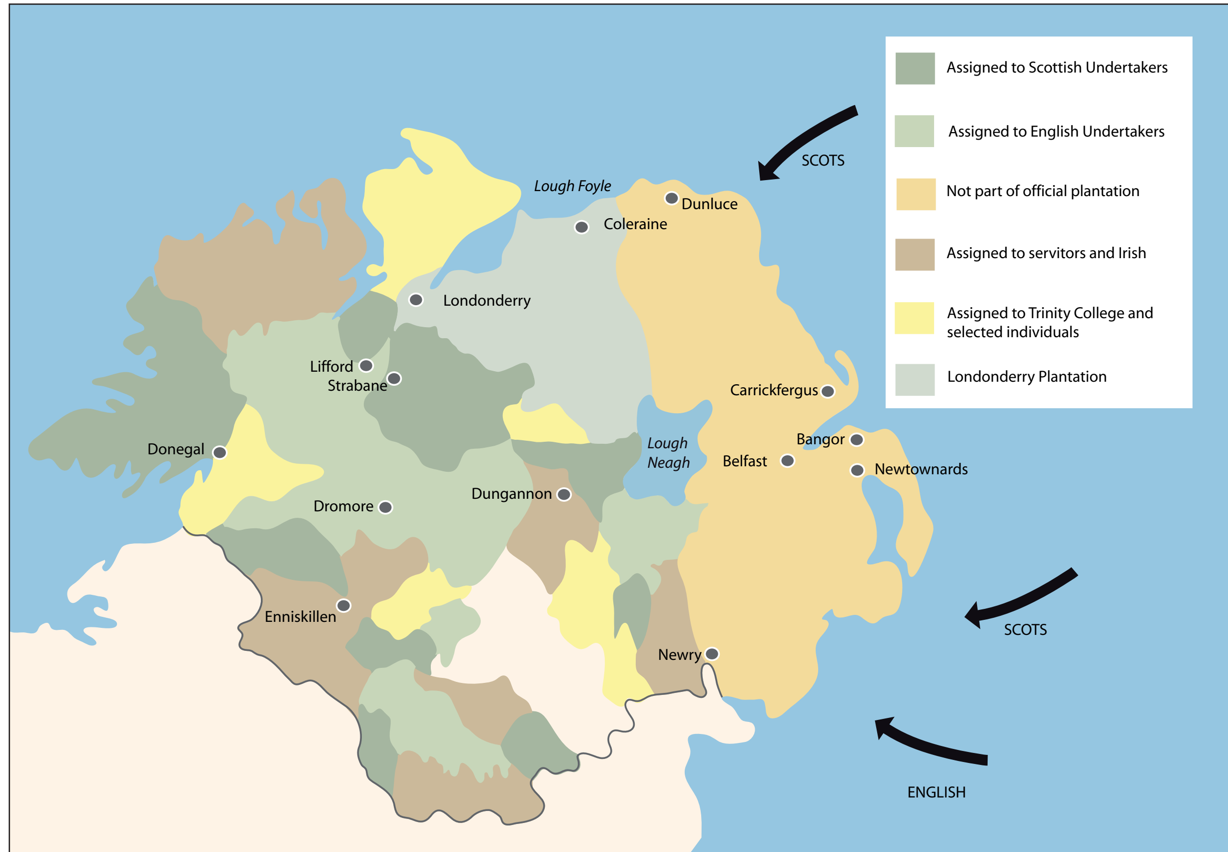
In 1605 King James VI and I appointed Chichester lord deputy (chief governor) of Ireland and then kept him in the post for over ten years. Since the Plantation, the main Irish project of the reign, was planned and set in motion during those years, Chichester was well placed to add to the lands he had already acquired in Antrim; in the end, he was the greatest individual beneficiary of the Plantation. An enthusiastic coloniser, he declared that he 'would rather labour with his hands in the plantation of Ulster than dance or play in that of Virginia'. And once, in reflective mood, he remarked, 'We are now all of us become buylders and planters here, and not wasters and destroyers as in our younger yeares'.[5]

A new town

The castle at Belfast was in ruins when Chichester got it in 1603, and the whole property so ravaged by the war that it yielded little in rent. At the time, he told the royal advisers that he would not expect to get more than five pounds for the freehold of the grant, including the governorship of Carrickfergus. No doubt he exaggerated his plight, but he was indeed in serious financial difficulty, which was made worse by a vexatious lawsuit challenging his title; until that was settled in his favour in 1608 there was little he was prepared to do by way of development. In the following year, however, he started investing in his new possessions. The commissioners appointed to report on the progress of the official plantation also visited Antrim and Down (which were not in the official scheme). They were favourably impressed by what they saw in Belfast, namely the nucleus of a planned settlement 'plotted out in a good forme, wherein are many famelyes of English, Scotch, and some Manksmen already inhabitinge, of which some are artificers who have buylte good tymber houses with chimneys after the fashion of the English palle [Pale], and one Inn with very good Lodginge which is a great comforte to the travellers in those partes'.[6]

The commissioners were particularly interested in the rebuilding of the castle, where workmen had 'taken down the ruins of the old castle almost to the valte above the Sellers, and had likewise layde the foundation of a bricke house 50 foote longe which is to be adjoyned to the sayd Castle …' The outer defences of the building were to consist of a bawn with four half-bulwarks encompassed by a deep moat. In the absence of reliable archaeological evidence no one is quite sure of the exact location of this building, but its approximate site was in an area bounded by Castle Place, Castle Lane and Donegall Place. The remarks of the commissioners remind us that in the absence of building stone in the vicinity, Belfast was always a brick town. Fortunately, there were large deposits of suitable clay nearby; Chichester fired thousands of them for use in the castle – enough, it was expected, to provide material for some other buildings too.[7]

It may be appropriate to mention at this point – however briefly – recent developments arising out of a programme of archaeological excavation. The two first examples are the original Anglo-Norman settlement and a probable small-scale one by the O'Neills of Clandeboye in the late medieval period. Thereafter the Plantation



THE PLANTATIONS OF ULSTER

Following the Irish defeat at the battle of Kinsale (1601), Elizabeth I's English forces subjugated Ireland, including Ulster. The Gaelic leaders of Ulster, the O'Neills and O'Donnells, fled *en masse* in 1607 to Europe, particularly to Spain and Italy. This 'Flight of the Earls' allowed the English Crown to colonise Ulster with more loyal English and Scottish 'planters', a process that began in earnest in 1610: King James I's plantation of Ulster.

town planned by the first Arthur Chichester completely controlled the development of the town.

Until recently the conventional account was based on George Benn's analysis in his *History of Belfast*. Benn pointed out that the three things distinguishing the locality in early times were the castle, the church and the ford. Most early references to the castle and the ford were to be found in the Irish Annals, though the entries were usually very brief or cryptic and were used for headline events and so did not necessarily give much information. What kind of Anglo-Norman castle was built to guard the ford was not known. No trace of it has survived, no date is known for certain. Frequent battles and skirmishes testify however to the importance of the ford as far back as the great battle between the Ulaid and the Cruithin in AD 668.

Archaeologists have become increasingly concerned about the damage done to the historic centre of Belfast by German bombs in the Blitz, then by IRA bombs in the Troubles and more recently by careless or indifferent schemes of redevelopment. The Environment and Heritage Service has promoted and carried out an extensive programme of excavations. The first dig was in 1983; between that date and 2005 fifty-one excavations have been completed. Only summary reports have been issued as yet for most of these but enough has been discovered to suggest that there is probably a good deal more to be found if the chance can be seized before it is too late.[8]

But to return to our main theme: two years later, in 1613, the little town was made into a corporate borough by royal charter, and its founder was created Baron Chichester of Belfast. For the next two centuries and more the fortunes of the town were to be closely bound up with those of the Chichester family, lords of Belfast, earls (from 1647) and marquesses (from 1791) of Donegall.

The reasons for the grant of the charter were entirely political. King James was about to summon a parliament in Dublin, and to make sure that its House of Commons would have a Protestant majority he created no fewer than forty new boroughs, each electing two members. So, as critics protested at the time, boroughs

BELFAST, c.1685

Plan of Belfast, after the map of the fortifications by Thomas Phillips. Note 'the Belfast River' (the Farset), flowing down the middle of High Street and into the Lagan just below the ford; the castle, surrounded by gardens; the tower of the Market House nearby; and the parish church. All of this is within the rampart built in 1641 (the 'old works').

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