

History of Limavady District Orange Lodge

The Orange Institution was founded in 1795 after the skirmish in County Armagh which is known as “the Battle of the Diamond”. The Roe Valley like mot of Ulster was convulsed by political upheaval in the late 18th Century. Limavady, as befitted a strong loyalist area, participated enthusiastically in the Volunteer movement in the late 1770’s. This semi-independent, largely Protestant body was the forerunner of the militias which later became a fertile recruiting ground for the Orange Institution. However Limavady was also an area where the United Irish movement was particularly strong, especially amongst the Presbyterians in rural areas.

Orangeism first came to County Londonderry in those areas where the linen industry was strong. Economic factors would have been very important in its growth. Although the first warrant seems to have been issued to Macosquin District, the movement grew from the south of the county. The spread of Orangeism to Limavady was inevitable. Much of the land around the area was owned by the Beresford family, one of whom John Claudius Beresford was one of the first Grand Secretaries of the Grand Orange Lodge. Furthermore, the Rector of Banagher, the Reverend George Blacker, was the uncle of William Blacker who had fought at the Diamond. Grand Lodge Records indicate that Lodges were operating in Limavady by 1800. The first mention of Limavady District as a separate body occurs in 1811. It was about this time that lodges were formed into Districts as they were too remote to be given control and direction even on a county structure. The County Londonderry Grand Orange Lodge met in Limavady in February 1814 and passed resolutions indicating a willingness to defend the Constitution. The first recorded District Master was William Thompson. His Lodge Number is unknown.

Incidents of sectarian violence were sporadic throughout the 1820s. During this period the Institution was in decline but in June 1829 the Grand Orange Lodge was reconstituted and 10 warrants were issued to Limavady District. A key figure at this time was the Reverend John Graham who was Rector of Tamlaghtard and the County Grand Master. He had been Grand Chaplain of Ireland and was very active in the re-establishment of Orangeism in the 1820’s. He was an enthusiastic poet, historian, and controversialist.

The oldest surviving report of a 12th July demonstration of this period is in the “Londonderry Sentinel” in 1831. The procession took place to the old Parish Church at Drumachose. Limavady lodges were joined by those from Aghadowey and Garvagh. In 1832 the Public Processions Act banned demonstrations and the Grand Lodge called on Brethren to obey this law. However, as in many places, the Orangemen of Limavady ignored the decision. As a result there was faction fight at Bellarena and several Orangemen were prosecuted. The authorities were regularly obliged to send bodies of Policemen to the District during this period and on many occasions Orangemen from Limavady defied the law and were subsequently prosecuted. In 1834 this backfired, when a large number of Orangemen came to the Old Courthouse and faced with an overwhelming crowd the Magistrates were obliged to release them, only to re-arrest them later on.

In 1835 Parliament held a Select Commission to investigate the history of Orangeism. This is the best early record of warrants for the whole of Ireland. Limavady was recorded as having eleven lodges under the Worshipful District Master James Sandford. Tensions continued to rise and in 1837 there was an incident where a large detachment of Police and the Military were sent to the town to stop the Orangemen parading to their demonstration field at Roe Park.

In the 1840's a new organisation called the Grand Lodge of Ulster was founded and most of the Lodges in County Londonderry joined it, in preference to belonging to the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland. However the two organisations amalgamated in 1848. The following year the Public Processions Act expired and the celebrations of the 12th were unrestrained. This was a time of increasing Nationalist agitation and the Orange Institution was prepared for a struggle should it prove necessary. However by 1850 the Public Processions Act was renewed. A major incident occurred in August 1854 in Limavady when there were widespread sectarian riots after the Roman Catholic Community held an open-air mission. There was on street fighting and the local Roman Catholic curate was arrested after firing a pistol. Although the Orange Order in the town was blamed for being involved in the riot, there was no evidence produced to prove that the Institution as a body had taken part in the riots.

By the 1870s the improvements in the Transport Network meant that Orangemen were travelling greater distances to their parades. It was about this time that the long established custom grew up for Limavady and Londonderry Orangemen to parade together. There are very few County Reports in existence for this period but the oldest extant from 1873 gave a total membership in the District at 425. The largest lodges were sitting in the town. Limavady was only the 5th largest District in the County at this time although this was to change in succeeding decades.

As the pace of political change heated up by 1880, the Orange Institution began to increase in strength. The District travelled to such venues as Ballymoney and Portstewart to celebrate the 12th. Until now lodges had met in private houses or licensed premises. By the late 19th Century the Grand Orange Lodge was encouraging the building of Orange Halls. The first Hall in the District was constructed in Limavady in 1890. Within a decade there were three more. It was partly a representation of the growing respectability of the Order. Whilst the aristocracy was still not prepared to join the institution, local Grandees were prepared to write letters of support or to attend the opening of halls.

One well remembered local incident occurred in 1898. The Orangemen of Limavady had purchased two cannons fifty years previously but the custodian of the guns, William Stewart Ross of Barley Park had died, his son was not sympathetic to Orange principles. It was felt that such a person should not have in his care the prized possession of the local lodges and accordingly steps were taken to liberate them. A suitably symbolic team of 13 Orangemen (recalling the 13 Apprentice Boys who shut the gates of Londonderry in 1688) was selected to remove the cannons. Mr. Ross took the new arrangements rather badly and there was some controversy in the local newspapers. However the local Orangemen were jubilant and had their picture taken and a celebratory poem was written.

The threat of Home Rule again raised its head at the beginning of the 20th Century. The Orange Order also faced internal disputes with the setting up of the Independent Orange Order in 1903 after a dispute in Belfast. Although the ILOL was at its strongest in County Antrim there was an attempt to form a lodge in Limavady but it seems to have been short lived. Membership in Limavady grew by a quarter between 1906 and 1913 with the imminent arrival of legislation to bring about Home Rule. As the Ulster Volunteer Force was set up, Lodges turned their halls over to drilling, lectures and fund raising events. They turned out in strength on the 28th September 1912 for the signing of the Ulster Covenant. They were also involved in importing guns in 1913. The high point of the Unionists' campaign in Limavady was the only visit to the town by Sir Edward Carson in April 1914 to inspect the Volunteers and to open their new Drill Hall which stood in Protestant Street. At the opening ceremony of the hall he received an illuminated address from the District Lodge Number 6. The onset of the Great War may well have prevented Civil War in Ulster but it was to bring great suffering to the loyal citizens in Limavady. Many Orangemen joined the 10th Battalion of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers which was formed from the County Londonderry UVF. The immediate post war period was a bleak time. The IRA was particularly active in the South of the District. Both Park and Feeney RIC barracks were attacked. At times the very existence of Northern Ireland seemed in to be in doubt. It is not surprising that membership in Limavady District peaked in the mid 1920's. One high point of this time was the visit in 1919 of Brother William Ferguson Massey, the Prime Minister of New Zealand and a proud member of "Young Diamond" LOL 10. He had emigrated from Limavady as a young man.

Between the Wars the depression hit Limavady hard and many members were forced to look elsewhere for a decent life. The Orange Order in Britain and North America sent circulars to local Lodges offering assistance to Brethren who had decided to emigrate. The Order continued to work closely with the Ulster Unionist Party. When war broke out again in 1939 Limavady and Aghanloo Halls were among those requisitioned to billet troops. As in the First World War, many Orangemen joined up to serve their Country.

The parading controversies which became familiar throughout the rest of Northern Ireland in recent years were well known to Limavady Orangemen long before they caused controversy elsewhere in Northern Ireland. In 1947 Bellarena was the scene of a bitter sectarian dispute when a new Protestant band was set up and local nationalists tried to prevent them parading. The controversy resulted in severe criticism for the RUC and the Minister of Home Affairs.

Further problems occurred in Dungiven in 1953 at the time of the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. Local nationalists objected to the Boveva Band parading through the town and the weak response of the unionist Government provoked strong reaction within the Orange Order throughout Northern Ireland. In due course the Government was forced to pass the Flags and Emblems Act to provide protection to the Union Flag.

1955 saw the purchase of the current Orange Field on the Roe Mill Road after over £2,000 was raised throughout the Protestant community. Membership of the Order continued to grow and by 1962 it totalled 1453, which was probably the highest membership in the history of Orangeism within the District. Junior Lodges were established, and a new Junior District Lodge was subsequently set up. A new lodge was inaugurated in Dungiven in 1961 and it was able to open its hall in 1968 but within a short time it was subjected to serious attack. As the civil unrest in the province grew, there were serious riot in 1969 in Dungiven and the hall was destroyed. This was far from the last attack on the hall.

The sixties were a turbulent period in the history of Northern Ireland and Limavady District witnessed some of this in Dungiven. In 1960 William Douglas was appointed District Master the first from a country lodge in living memory, Douglas would have a huge influence on Orangeism not just in Limavady but further a field he would continue to hold the position until 1990. Dungiven would remain the focus for most of the sixties, mainly because of the issue around being able to parade through the town, however with the onset of IRA attacks the main concern turned towards protecting the community. Indeed the Orange Order would encourage its membership to join the RUC and the UDR and it would count the cost. With 355 brethren killed during the course of the troubles, Limavady District would count itself lucky during this period as it lost no members to terrorist attacks.

Membership would continue to exceed one thousand until the eighties. In recent years however a decline in numbers has happened settling to around six hundred. The political situation rapidly changed for Orangemen from the late sixties to the mid eighties, with Anglo-Irish Agreement being the main concern by 1985. Coming to the end of the eighties and beginning of the nineties seen a number of key anniversaries being celebrated. With 1990 being the three hundredth anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne it would also be the last time Limavady held a county Londonderry demonstration and 1995 being the two hundredth anniversary of the forming of the Orange institution.

Recent years has seen a number of developments and milestones which were both eventful and a chance to look back with great pride. The District has also seen a number of its brethren rise to the high ranks of office within the institution most notably that of Rev. Alistair Smyth who was appointed Deputy Grand Master. 2010 will represent a another milestone for Limavady District has it holds its first annual awards night and also launches its website, with energy and drive Limavady District is well set for the 21st century and for future milestones and successes.