

BELLE ISLE

CASTLE & PRIVATE ISLAND



A Short History of Belle Isle Castle & Private Island
By: William Roulston

Descriptions Of Belle Isle In The Seventeenth And Eighteenth Centuries

The following set of descriptions of Belle Isle has been compiled from various sources, including manuscript accounts, published books by antiquarians, social scientists and travellers through Ireland.

J. or T. Dolan's description of County Fermanagh, 1718 – copy in National Library of Ireland, MS 2085 (photocopy in Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, T1875/1-2)

Dolan noted that Sir Ralph Gore had 'much improved and beautified at his own expense' the island of Ballymacmanus with 'very costly and pleasant buildings & improvements' and renamed it Bellisle.

Rev. William Henry account of Fermanagh, 1739 – copy in Armagh Public Library (typescript in Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, T2521/3/1); see also Sir Charles Simeon King, *Henry's Upper Lough Erne in 1739* (1892), pp 43-6.

The pleasantest of these islands is Belle Isle, the seat of the late Sir Ralph Gore – one of the Lords Justices of Ireland. It contains 200 plantation acres of very good land, rising on every side from the water in a gentle ascent. On the north side it is united to the mainland by a large terrace, that was finished with great labour – the lough being on each side of it very deep – there were planted along the sides of the terrace rows of trees; and a pallsade was carried along to prevent passengers from falling into the water. On the south side of the isle stands the house, which is but a small lodge, chiefly agreeable for its situation; from the house descends in an hanging level to the lough a parterre, enclosed on the east and west sides with high walls covered with fruit trees, and having on the extremities on each side square turrets, which hang over the lough: at the foot of the parterre is a quay, where used to ride all kinds of pleasant boats. Exactly frontward from the house, the islands – which are all wooded and gently rising – are ranged to regularly on each hand, that they, with the Lake between them, form the appearance of a grand avenue planted in clumps. This avenue, on the water, is continued for three miles, widening regularly as it removes from the house, and terminates no less agreeably in the beautiful hill of Knockninny.

**Arthur Young's Tour in Ireland (1776-1779), ed. Arthur Wollaston Hutton
(London, 1892), pp 197-9**

August 15th [1776], to Belleisle, the charming seat of the Earl of Ross. It is an island in Loch Earne of 200 Irish acres, every part of it hill, dale, and gentle declivities; it has a great deal of wood, much of which is old, and forms both deep shades, and open chearful groves. The trees hang on the slopes, and consequently shew themselves to the best advantage. All this is exceedingly pretty, but it is rendered trebly so by the situation: a reach of the lake passes before the house, which is situated near the banks among some fine woods, which give both beauty and shelter. This sheet of water, which is three miles over, is bounded in front by an island of thick wood; and by a bold circular hill, which is his Lordship's deer park, this hill is backed by a considerable mountain. To the right are four or five fine clumps of dark wood; so many islands which rise boldly from the lake, the water breaks in straits between them, and forms a scene extremely picturesque. On the other side the lake stretches behind wood, in a streight, which forms Belleisle. Lord Ross has made walks round the island, from which there is a considerable variety of prospect. A temple is built on a gentle hill, commanding the view of the wooded islands abovementioned; but the most pleasing prospect of them is coming out from the grotto : they appear in an uncommon beauty; two seem to join, and the water which flows between takes the appearance of a fine bay, projecting deep into a dark wood : nothing can be more beautiful. The park hill rises above them, and the whole is backed with mountains. The home scene at your feet also is pretty; a lawn scattered with trees forms the margin of the lake, closing gradually in a thick wood of tall trees, above the tops of which is a distant view of Cultiegh 2 mountain, which is there seen in its proudest solemnity. ... Lord Ross has generally a small field of turneps and cabbages for feeding sheep in the winter; finds that cabbages are much the best, and last the longest.

Jonathan Fisher, Scenery of Ireland (1795), noted

a handsome cottage at Bellisle with a kitchen and other conveniences, in a sweet retired part, secluded from the powerful influence of the sun in the summer months.

**Edward Gibbon Wakefield, *An Account of Ireland, Statistical and Political*
(London, 1812), vol. 1, pp 22-3**

Belleisle, when I was there, belonged to Sir Richard Hardinge, in right of his lady; but it has since been sold to Mr. Hannington. The mansion is small, and situated on a woody island, which is accessible by means of a causeway and a bridge, consisting of one arch. The island contains 112 acres. Adjacent to it is another island, nearly of the same extent; and both exhibit a most agreeable prospect, being covered with thriving woods of ash, oak, beech, and firs. The house fronts the south, and has before it a neat lawn, ornamented with gravel-walks and plantations. Immediately before it, at the distance of about three miles, stands a green hill, called Knockninny, which was formerly a deer park, but is now let as a farm. Behind this hill the scenery consists of a greenish mountain, which appears to be cultivated to a certain height; and connected on the right with a ridge of much higher black mountains, the termination of which becomes lost in the horizon. Immediately to the westward, within about a quarter of a mile of West Island, is a range of eleven other islands, all covered to the water's-edge with timber, which stretches directly across the lake. On the left, in this view from the house, the lake appears too narrow, and to possess less beauty than the western side, which I have described.

On the 30th of August, 1808, I enjoyed the pleasure of a most delightful water excursion on Lough Erne, which is still fresh in my memory; but I regret that my talent for description is little calculated to do justice to scenes which would require a more lively imagination than I possess, and a much more animated pen. As the party intended to visit Crum, a small lodge ten miles distant, belonging to Lord Erne, we attempted to direct our vessel to the south-east of the old castle, which stands on the main land, and of which little now remains; but it is celebrated for a most extraordinary ewe-tree, throwing out its branches to the enormous distance of forty-five feet. Unfortunately the wind was against us; and after beating about the lake for three hours, to the southward of Knockninny, we were reluctantly obliged to return, heartily fatigued; but compensated, in some measure, for our disappointment, by the beauty of the surrounding scenery. The views on the lake are indeed delightful, and very different from those which you enjoy during a ride on the land. The eye being very little elevated above the surface of the lake, the shores appear as if emerging from the water. The island of Belleisle, with its white mansion, surrounded by thick plantations, is the first striking object that occurs; and the eye is afterwards attracted by the other wooded islands, stretching in a semicircular direction across the widest part of the lake; and by the black mountains of great height, which rise directly beyond them. Although the sun shed his rays with great brightness, a blue mist, rising from the summits of these salubrious ridges, and apparently reaching the skies, gave a romantic and picturesque cast to the whole scene; and suggested to my mind some of those sublime passages which occur in the works of a northern poet.

These islands lie at various distances from each other, some of them being half a mile apart. Sir Richard Hardinge says, the passages between them are as wide, and, he thinks, very similar to, the Straits of Sunda, in the East Indies. We sailed through some of them, and landed on one of the islands, called Kelligowan, which contains forty acres of land, and produces oak, ash, firs, willows, and hazel, of an extraordinary size, intermixed with briars and underwood, that reach to the very edge of the water. Beyond this appeared another island, far more extensive, called Ennismore, and containing 1400 acres. Among these islands, the scene is continually varying in all directions; the expanse of water is completely lost, and in many places the appearance is exactly the same as that which occurs to those sailing either up or down a large river, bordered by woody banks, and pursuing its sluggish course amidst distant mountains. Yet these reaches are short; and in a moment, on turning round a point of land, you are suddenly and unexpectedly astonished by a wide expanse of water spread out before you; and numerous wooded islands, like clumps of trees, emerging from the bosom of the lake. The fresh green colour of Knockninny, Belleisle, and the West Island, together with the distant prospect of the Black Mountain, form a delightful assemblage of objects, in which the softer beauties of nature are so blended with the sublime, as to excite a sensation of pleasure, mixed with surprise and astonishment. In a word, the beauties of Lough Erne charm by their variety, and the continued change of scenery.

[p. 623, footnote] August 29, 1809 [1809?] Fermanagh, Belleisle. Turf is sold here by the horse load, of four bushels, at from five pence to seven pence. Sir Richard Hardinge, who has but a small establishment and resides here only in summer, pays £250 per annum for fuel.

[p. 729, footnote] August 29, 1808 Belleisle. It is estimated that four stone of barley or six of oats will make a gallon of whisky. A sack of barley which contains 24 stone will however be sufficient for 10 gallons. Expenses are as follows: Malting 5s., grinding 2s., carrying to the mill 2s., mashing and distilling 5s. 5d., hire of vessels 5s. 5d., fuel 3s., barley 5s. A tin still costs three guineas; a copper worm three guineas, a copper still five guineas; a still will hold 70 gallons. It is reckoned that a copper still makes the best whisky.

[Thomas Walford] *The Scientific Tourist Through Ireland: By which the Traveller is Directed to the Principal Objects of Antiquity, Art, Science & the Picturesque; Arranged by Counties, to which is Added an Introduction to the Study of Antiquities of Ireland, Etc* (London, 1818)

Those who have time to spare, or the artist who wishes to devote his time to study, may employ a few days very agreeably in perambulating its limits ... but where a day only can be allowed for seeing it, that day will be most profitably spent on the island of Bellisle, where the Earl of Ross has a most delightful residence. Here we may introduce an observation, regard to which will often be highly useful to the picturesque tourist – It is, that the same view presents a very different appearance when seen at the commencement and at the close of day. In no part of the world is this, perhaps, more noticeable, than in Ireland, owing to its moisture, raised into vapour by a meridian sun, condensed by cold winds rushing in through extended valleys, through the day, settling in the dells or fringeing the mountain tops in the still repose of evening, or rising like a curtain at the influence of the morning beam. In pursuance then of this hint, the hurried tourist, especially if pedestrian, should proceed to Bellisle at the earliest dawn, and he will find himself sufficiently occupied until the nightfall in traversing its limits round an extent of 200 acres consisting of all the variety of hill and dale, with partial sprinklings of lawn, interspersed with ancient woods of considerable extent, in some spots exhibiting all the deep majesty of shade, in others opening into more cheerful clumps, or scattered breaks of foliage. The varied surface exhibits the whole contents of this woody scenery to great advantage, presenting, even in what may be called the home views, sufficient amusement for a day; but much increased by its junction with the surrounding scenery at every break in the hills, and at every verdant point jutting into the lake, particularly so in front of the mansion, where a reach of it passes under the eye of the spectator, reflecting the fine woods and rising banks that give beauty to the scene and shelter to the house itself. This part of the lake, being 3 m. in length, possesses all the charms of distance, and has in front another island clothed thick with wood encircling a bold eminence, appropriated to the purposes of a deer park, in the rear of which a lofty mountain gives almost a magic relief to the whole. This is finely contrasted, on a short turn to the right, by some clumps of rich foliage, and by several pretty islands starting boldly from the surface, broken into a thousand picturesque forms by the windings of the lake, and the whole body of water is lost in a narrow defile where hill on hill closes the view. Here too is every facility for viewing the lake in a double route; as the walks most commodiously surround the island at its outer most limits, besides leading to the best points of view in the interior; and indeed it will be proper not to omit the prospect from a handsome temple which commands the whole of this enchanting scenery. The grotto ought also to be visited, and attention paid to the effect on coming out of it, when the contrast presents a beautiful effect, in two of these islands appearing to join, the straight between them having the semblance of a deep bay, whose extremity is lost amidst the sombre foliage in the background. Behind these is the hill of the deer park, the lofty mountains behind which for a moment draw attention from the nearer beauties; but these latter must not be neglected, as their examination in all the neatness of artificial culture contrasts finely with the bleak and wild surrounding imagery of nature.

Bellisle is a considerable island, containing, it is said, 200 Irish acres; and formed at one time the favourite demesnes of the Earl of Ross. We landed at the lowest part of it, ascended the hill on which the house is situated, passing our way through fine- pasturage, with large flocks of grazing. Bellisle, which was once celebrated, not only the natural beauty of its situation, but for the taste displayed in the improvements of the Earl of Ross, at present scarcely retains a vestige of what it once was; and any person reads the description given of it in Young's tour, with its hanging woods and deep groves, its walks, its gardens, its temples, can scarcely believe that in, so short a time could be reduced to its present state. The roads and are overgrown with weeds; the bridges have fallen; and house itself is in such a state of dilapidation, as to seem uninhabitable. A green-house, that at one time covered the front, is nearly a heap of ruins; and the neglected vines, unrestrained by the hand of man, have forced their way in many, through the glass which remains, and trail unheeded the ground. The view, from the front, of the house, is fine; commanding an extensive prospect of the lake, which is here studded with numerous islands. On leaving the we proceeded to our boat, which we had ordered to meet at the bridge that connects Bellisle with the main land, our way we were joined by a sort of fresh-water sailor, conducted us to the bridge, and who being known to boatmen offered to steer to Enniskillen. This person found to be very intelligent, and possessed of a perfect know ledge of all the country we passed through. He lamented: with much feeling the fallen state of Bellisle, which he represented as having been, in his youth, the most beautiful place this country; and deplored the ravages- that had been committed on its fine forests of venerable trees among which, he informed us, there had been oaks of immense magnitude. All had been cut down some years ago.



Ordnance Survey Memoir of Cleenish parish by Lieut. Chaytor, 1835, pp 13, 17, 19

Belle Isle ... consists of 2 islands communicating by a small bridge across a drain of 140 yards in length and 5 yards wide. The eastern part is chiefly planted and contains the remains of the residence of the late Lord Ross, at present in a dilapidated state. The communication with the mainland is by a bridge of rude construction consisting of a causeway of loose stones from each shore to near the centre, where a gap is left to allow a passage for the water. The gap is covered over by logs of timber and on these are laid sods and gravel. The length of this bridge is 14 perches from shore to shore. The western part of Belle Isle also contains some plantation and was also part of Lord Ross' demesne. It is 1 mile in length from north to south and averages nearly three-eighths of a mile in breadth. It contains a small interior lake of 3 and a half acres.

...

Belle Isle, which was lately the residence of the late Lord Viscount Ross, bears traces of having been a splendid mansion and elegant demesne, but both are at present in a state bordering on ruin. It is pleasantly situated on an island in Lough Erne commanding a fine view of the broadest part of the upper lough. The plantations about it are extensive and well laid out but, as well as the house and offices, they are going to decay from neglect. ...

Belle Isle, with its broken bridge and dilapidated buildings and other marks of its former splendour, shows and elegant mansion in perhaps one of the most picturesque situations in the country falling fast into a ruinous state. ...

Jonathan Binns, *The Miseries and Beauties of Ireland* (London, 1837), vol. 1, pp 283-4

Belleisle, the property of the Rev. Gray Porter, is situated on the higher lake, and in addition to its beauty, is remarkable as being the first grant made in Ireland after the confiscation. It contains upwards of 300 acres, and was originally the property of a Lord Ross, who from this island took the title of Lord Belleisle. It descended by marriage to Sir H. Hardinge, who sold it to the present proprietor. The house, once famed for its hospitality, is now a ruin.

Samuel Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (London, 1837), vol. 1, p. 277, 607

In the vicinity of the village are several ancient raths or forts; and on a finely wooded island in Lough Erne, connected by a causeway with the main land, is Belleisle, the ruined seat of the late Earl of Rosse. ...

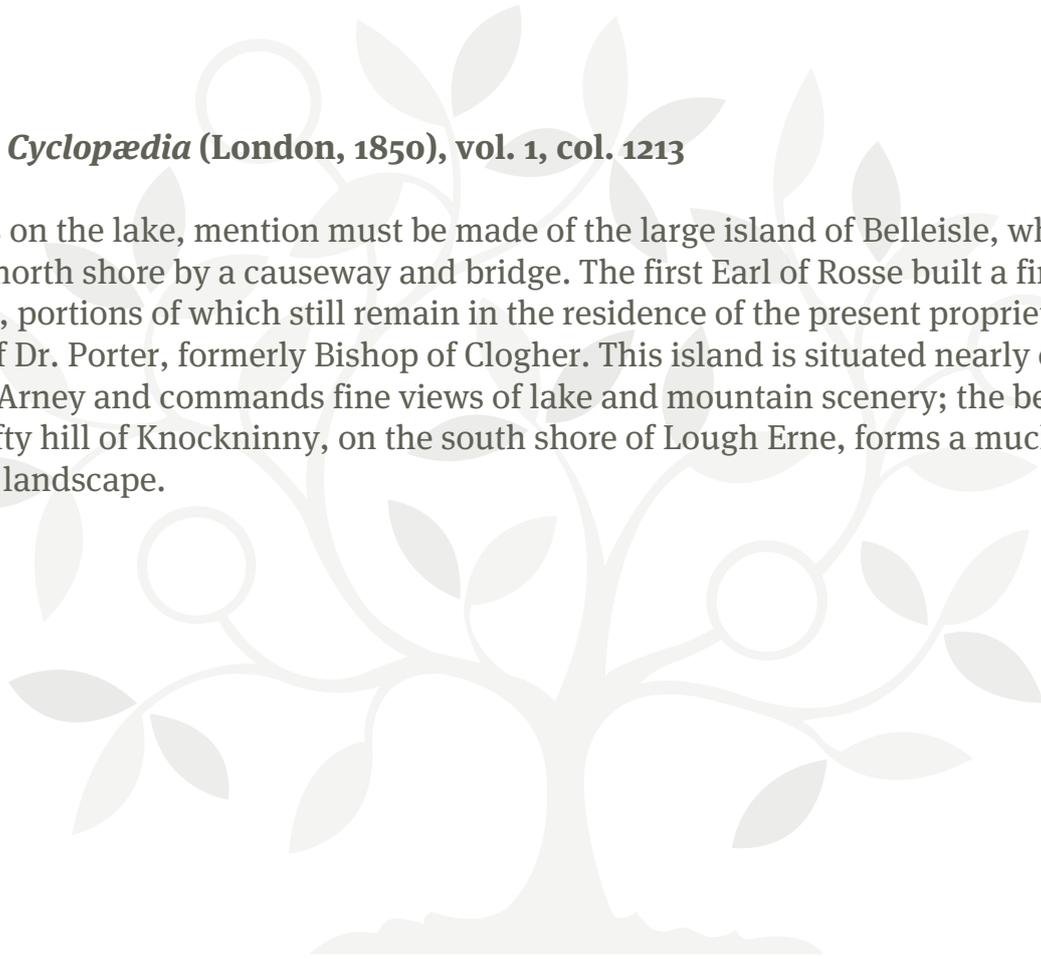
On the border of Lough Erne stands Belleisle, the beautiful and romantic seat of the late Earl of Rosse, now in the possession of the Rev. J. Grey Porter; it is in a dilapidated state, but is about to be rebuilt, together with the bridge leading to its extensive demesne.

James Fraser, *A Hand Book for Travellers in Ireland* (Dublin, 1844), p. 501

Resuming our road to Enniskillen, at three miles from Lisnaskea we pass, at about a mile and a half to the left, Belleisle, the seat of the Rev. Grey Porter, and formerly the residence of the first Earl of Rosse. Mr. Porter is restoring this beautifully situated residence. Belleisle, one of the largest of the islands in Upper Lough Erne, is situated at the northern extremity of that fine lake, and close to the point where the overflowing waters again assume the river character, and issue by the northern channel toward Enniskillen. Belleisle formerly possessed some of the largest trees in the kingdom; but the greater part of them were cut before it came into the possession of Mr. Porter; and since that period the hurricane in January, 1839, blew down the majestic elms in the long approach. The beautiful hill of Knockninny, on the opposite side of Lough Erne, forms a striking object from Belleisle House.

***The Imperial Cyclopædia* (London, 1850), vol. 1, col. 1213**

Of the islands on the lake, mention must be made of the large island of Belleisle, which is joined to the north shore by a causeway and bridge. The first Earl of Rosse built a fine mansion on this island, portions of which still remain in the residence of the present proprietor, who is a descendant of Dr. Porter, formerly Bishop of Clogher. This island is situated nearly opposite the mouth of the Arney and commands fine views of lake and mountain scenery; the beautiful, green, and lofty hill of Knockninny, on the south shore of Lough Erne, forms a much admired feature of the landscape.



J. B. Doyle, *Tours in Ulster: A hand-book to the antiquities and scenery of the north of Ireland* (Dublin, 1854), p. 375

Belleisle, once the beautiful residence of the Earls of Rosse, but now wholly forsaken, is capable of being made a most charming demesne.

William Frederick Wakeman, *Lough Erne, Enniskillen, Belleek, Ballyshannon, and Bundoran* (Dublin, 1870), pp 63-8

Further on, we meet with Carry Bridge, connecting Inismore with the mainland. After a short run, we pass, upon the left-hand side, the beautiful Island of Belleisle, lately the possession of Lord Rosse, but now the seat of J. G. V. Porter, Esq., a gentleman who, more than any other now living, has devoted his time, money, and energies in the endeavour to develop the resources of Lough Erne and those of the adjoining districts. To give even a slight review of Mr. Porter's plans would be out of place here, but we may say that his chief aim is to make Enniskillen, Belleek, and Belturbet principal points in the great network of inland navigation which spreads over all Ireland. This is to be accomplished by excavating and dredging the shoals of the lough, and by the establishment at Belleek of a series of well-considered regulating wiers, sluices, &c., by which the water may be kept throughout the year at a uniform level. By this plan many thousands of acres of low-lying land, now rendered comparatively valueless by spring and autumnal floodings, would become permanently reclaimed. He would further, by utilising Lough Erne in connexion with existing canals (which, though they cost the country millions in their construction, are now, through long continued neglect, all but impassable), render the carriage of heavy matters—such as minerals, bricks, stone, all building materials, lime, coal, agricultural manures, pottery earths, &c.—cheap, and at the same time remunerative to the carriers. 'Canals,' he says, in reference to the supposed antagonism between lines of railway and canals running somewhat in the same direction, 'are carts and waggons, railways are carriages to the nineteenth century—each helps the other. The more the natural resources of this country are developed, and the more civilised becomes the life of our people in good houses, the more business will there be for our railways and canals.' One project considered by Mr. Porter to be of the highest importance, not only in connexion with the lake district, but also with a considerable portion of the NorthWest of Ireland, was the establishment of steam communication to and fro between Belturbet and Belleek—a project which, because it might be carried out at his particular cost and sole risk, is now, we need not inform our fellow-voyagers by the Knockminny, a fait accompli. Belleisle, described in 1834 as "one of those graceful, incipient rains in which

***'Decay's effacing fingers
Have swept the lines where beauty lingers,'***

is now restored to more than its pristine elegance. The mansion, though plain, is substantial and commodious, commanding, we believe, the finest view which can be obtained (except from a considerable and uninhabitable elevation) of the upper lake and its numerous isles. The plantation is old, and comprises several yew groves, which are venerable enough to have furnished bow-staves to the warriors and hunters of the MacManuses, who, in the days of the red deer and wolf, lorded it over this island as their home and citadel.

Tradition places a monastery, with which the old yews have probably some connexion, upon this island. We all know that in Ireland the yew tree furnishes the emblematic palm which decorates the altars of the Roman Catholic churches on 'Palm Sunday;' it is also worn in the hats or upon the dresses of the peasantry in honour of the event which that great festival of the Roman Church commemorates. Whether a monastery existed here or not, Bellisle, or rather Bally MacManus, the old name of the place, is interesting as having been the residence of Cathal Maguire, a learned writer, who here, in the 14th century, compiled one of the best collections of the Annals of Ireland which we still possess, and which are known as 'The Annals of Ulster.' In his great work the historian was probably assisted by the use of books and documents deposited in the archives of the neighbouring abbey of Gola ("the river forks"), not one stone of which at present remains above ground, though the site is still reverentially pointed out. ...

The library at Bellisle is rich and valuable. It was some few years ago deposited in Enniskillen for the use of the public, but was there more abused than used, and at length, finding that the moderate sum necessary for the safe-keeping of the books, payment of caretaker, &c., could no longer be raised, Mr. Porter was obliged reluctantly to withdraw his unappreciated boon. There is also at Bellisle what we trust is only the commencement of a large collection of national antiquities. ...

Bellisle, in the good old times, before the introduction of railways and steam-boats, was a very secluded place. Lord Rosse, in going to or from the island used to embark his carriage and horses in a huge flat-bottomed boat, which was rowed across the lough. His favourite road was upon the Knockninny side, so that a drive ever so short by land necessitated a considerable trip by water. The ghost of his lordship is said to haunt the old house. What must be its sensations on beholding the Knockninny? Once past Bellisle, we glide by Killygowan Island into the broad waters of the Upper Lough Erne. Killygowan ("the wood of the smith") is Mr. Porter's deer-park.

T. Plunkett, 'On the exploration of the Knockninny Cave' in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 2nd series vol. 2 (1875-7), pp 466

The hill [Knockninny] commands one of the most magnificent and comprehensive views to be obtained in the fifty-two miles of country through which Lough Erne passes. Standing on its top, and looking towards the north on the opposite side of the lake, there appears, sequestered in a shady nook on the wooded island of Belleisle, the square tower attached to the residence of J. G. V. Porter, Esq. ...

Mr. Porter, whose residence I have described, is owner of a large portion of Knockninny hill, and has built a neat hotel at its base on the shore of the lake. Were it not for his enterprising and generous spirit, the public would have no means of visiting the scenery and antiquities of Lough Erne, as he, at considerable expense and pecuniary loss, keeps a neat steam-boat on the lake for the accommodation of tourists. But for this gentleman Knockninny cave would probably still remain unexplored. During the month of June last I had been exploring some eaves in the mountains west of Enniskillen, when I happened to meet Mr. Porter, and had some conversation with him on cave-hunting. He at once asked me to make a preliminary inspection of the 'fox cave' at Knockninny, and ascertain if it was worth exploring, proposing at the same time to supply any labourers I might require. I at once accepted his kind offer, and on a convenient day visited the cave, bringing with me two labourers who were in Mr. Porter's employment, working in a quarry at Knockninny.

Dublin Daily Express, 20 Sept. 1880: article headed 'Lough Erne'

Under Knockninny, at the very edge of the lake, stands the pleasant hotel kept by Mr J Latimer, the proprietor, a centre for many tour by land or by water. On the other side stands Belleisle, residence of Mr J. Porter, who lives among his tenants, men of the right sort, and from his lofty tower not only surveys his own broad lands, but the whole lake, and marks the cruel floods, devouring the fruits of industry on many an acre. By Mr Porter's exertions, after thirteen years of labour, not less than 17,000 acres of good land along the margins of the lake are to be in future saved from the ravages of flood. The drainage works are to be carried out according the plans of Mr James Price, CE; at the same time the navigation is to be preserved and improved; the two lakes will form an unbroken sheet of deep water 52 miles in length, which unique in these islands.

