

The Ralahine Commune

Ralahine is a townland located about three miles south east of Newmarket on Fergus village. It was the location for an extraordinary experiment in communism in 1831, long before communism as we have come to know it, became a reality.

This was a very turbulent time in Clare. The population of the country had trebled in less than a century and over 240,000 people lived in Clare. Two thirds of these people had little or no land and were dependant on the landowning classes for work as farm labourers. During the latter part of the 1700s and the early 1800s there was a growth in labour intensive tillage and from 1790 until the defeat of Napoleon, the European wars gave rise to a buoyant market and high prices. With Napoleon's defeat, prices stagnated, and it became more profitable for the large landowners to use their land for raising livestock rather than growing crops. This meant less manual work for the labouring class. To make matters worse, there were minor famines in 1816, 1822 and 1830. This all led to agrarian unrest, and secret societies such as the Terry Alts and Lady Clare's Boys carried out a campaign of violence, intimidation and damage to livestock and machinery on the estates. In Ralahine, this violence culminated in the murder of the steward at the Vandeleur estate. John Scott Vandeleur and his family fled for their safety to Limerick.

Eight years earlier, Vandeleur had attended a lecture in Dublin given by Robert Owen, a philanthropist who was appalled by the workers' conditions in the cotton mills in England. Owen promoted a new way of living and arrangements for the treatment of workers. He promoted self sustaining communities, with a big emphasis on training, education and self reliance. He put his ideas forward as a method of solving the catastrophic situation that both landlords and workers found themselves in. Vandeleur was open-minded about the merits of these ideas and his dire situation in 1830 prompted him to set up an Owenite community on his estate.

The man who was hired to put the plan into action was Edward T Craig, an organiser for Robert Owen, a journalist and inventor. He arrived at Ralahine to be met by a suspicious workforce and tension was very high. However he communicated well with the locals, and quickly succeeded in convincing them to become part of this new system.

The aims and objectives of the commune were:

- The acquisition of common capital.

- The mutual assurance of the members against poverty, sickness and old age.
- The attainment of a greater share of the comforts of life than the working class were accustomed to.
- The mental and moral improvement of its adult members.
- Education of the children.

The commune started off with fifty two people, twenty one single men, five single women, seven married couples, five children under five years and seven orphans under the age of seventeen. They all were required to leave their houses and relocate to the accommodation provided within the estate. Married couples lived in cottages, and there were dormitories for the single people and the orphans. Children of the families could sleep either in dormitories or in the cottages. If they used the dormitories their food was paid for out of commune funds. School in the commune started at 6.00 am and continued till 6.00 pm. There was a communal dining area and particular members of the commune were in charge of catering. The commune was run by a committee of nine, six of whom were elected by the members. The treasurer, secretary and storekeeper were permanent appointments made by Vandeleur. There was no steward; work schedules were decided at evening meetings and there were weekly review meetings. Some of the advantages for the workers were as follows:

- Guaranteed work all year
- Greater comforts, better housing, no travelling to work, education.
- Guaranteed income.
- Fixed prices for essentials.
- Having a sense of responsibility and self belief.

The advantages for the landlord were:

- Higher Rent.
- Better interest on capital.
- Punctual payment.
- Security
- Safety of stock and machinery.

There were lots of rules and regulations. Alcohol, gambling and tobacco were banned. Prospective new members had to be voted in by the other members and if a member wanted to marry an outsider, the prospective spouse had to be voted in by the members. The use of nick names was forbidden.

There were fixed prices. Fruit and vegetables 1s per week per adult, milk 1d per quart, beef and mutton 4d per pound, pork 2s 5d per pound, rent of a cottage 6d per week, fuel 2d per week.

Wages were as follows: eight pence per day for male farm labourers and five pence per day for female workers. Tradesmen were paid higher rates. In order to assess the actual value of these wage rates, we can refer to a summary of wages earned and essential expenditure incurred by all the members for a particular week and we learn that the cost of all food, fuel, rent etc for that week was just over £4 and the total wages earned was just over £10, so an average of forty percent of earnings was spent on the necessities.

The commune was required to pay the owner, Mr. Vandeleur £900 per annum and this was paid in produce from the estate as follows:

6,400 stones of wheat @ 1s 6d	£480
3,840 stones of barley @ 10d	£160
480 stones of oats @ 10d	£20
70 cwt of beef @ 40s	£140
30 cwt of pork @ 40s	£60
10 cwt of butter @ 80s	<u>£40</u>
Total	£ 900

So this was a very onerous task and required dedicated work and organisation. However in the first year of operation the targets were met and membership numbers increased to 81 in year two. Mr. Vandeleur purchases a corn cutting machine costing £25 which would enable more efficiency at harvest time.

There was a great celebration at the Harvest Festival in 1833, there were complimentary speeches, singing and a celebratory dinner. However, soon afterwards disaster struck.

John Scott Vandeleur, the owner of the estate and the President of the Association disappeared. It transpired that he had incurred huge gambling debts and the estate went bankrupt. His brother in law, James Molony of Kiltannon contrived to retain ownership of the estate for the Vandeleur family but the commune was at an end. There was no cash left and the members of the commune who were paid in Labour Notes were finally reimbursed by Edward Craig out of his own resources. Edward Craig and his wife Mary returned to England; the members of the commune reverted to their prior status of workers in the estate.

Today there are some remnants of the commune infrastructure, such as the cottages of the married members, some mill buildings and the tower house inhabited by the Vandeleurs from the mid 1600s until they built a modern house. This house was demolished during the twentieth century. Arthur Vandeleur, son of John Scott Vandeleur married his first cousin Mary Molony and their daughter Lucy married Mr A B Stoney and they successfully ran the estate until the early twentieth century.

Further Reading.

E.T.Craig, *An Irish Commune*, (Blackrock, 1983).

Vincent Geoghegan, *Ralahine: An Irish Owenite Community (1831-1833)*, in *International Review of Social History*, XXXVI, pp377-411.