



The burn path. This quiet lane is centuries old. The once open burn was culverted for 'safety reasons' forty years ago.

'The lane they call Church Lane now, was called Mill Lane. The farmers all dumped their manure and seaweed at the foot of the Cannyreagh Road. All the farmers up that road when I was a boy, the Curraghs, the Keatings, the Carsons, the Carsons' forefathers, carted the wrack off the foreshore and emptied it there while the tide was out. And then when the tide was in they carted it up and put it on the fields.'

'The Killaughey Road was known as the Creighle Raw [out to the clay holes at Killaughey.] It never got going until they were going to get the airfield there [1944-45] and they started in and widened the road here and there.'⁸

'There was a public house at the corner of the New Street where McCaw's is now [the new Corner Shop]. It was The Auld House at Home. New Street mustn't have been very open at the time and it was narrow. I can remember them lowering New Street down [about three feet] – you can still see the steps up to a number of doorways.'

'Farmers would come [down New Street] with their carts, taking meal out of Jimmie Smith's – it was further down. Johnnie Sloan's was further down than that. And then there was Mary Eadie's and Captain Tosh's; they were tobacconists, and where the [Ulster] bank is were two or three old ladies, sisters, the Miss Caugheys, they had a very big house there, as big as the bank. They built the new bank in nineteen and twenty-two. I remember that anyway.'

'You've heard tell of the Murder Lane? They have changed the name of it [to Town Hall Lane]. The reason it got Murder Lane was when sailormen coming off a voyage went up to the public house that was at the head of it there – Grace Neill's bar.'

'Was anyone actually murdered in Murder Lane?' I ask.

'Well, you weren't murdered, but you were very near murdered. You know, you got a bloomin' good hidin' whenever you came from a public house and come down that way to get on the shore to go down to the harbour. I remember one or two gettin' a thumpin' up there, up that lane. But before that they said that people was murdered, but I don't know that there was ever anybody murdered in it, but "They got a good murderin," they'd have said.'

'Murder Lane' may be a reminder of the more ribald life of the eighteenth century port. Thankfully, for the present at least, things have somewhat calmed down.

11 Guns and grog

Grace Neill's

Just about every visitor to Donaghadee visits Grace Neill's in High Street. The inn's public bar is so redolent of 'the olden days' that one can easily people the place in one's mind with imaginary smugglers and revenue men, not to mention rebels from 1798. It is a joy not to be missed.

Grace Neill's is a very old hostelry. But when was it founded? The bar's signage states that it was established in 1611. But there is no evidence to support this claim, and as the most comprehensive study of the buildings of Donaghadee diplomatically puts it, this date is 'a little optimistic.'¹ It is unlikely that anyone would have built an inn this far outside of the necessary security of the tiny Scots pale just five short years after Montgomery's arrival.

It is also widely believed that no less a figure than Peter the Great stayed at Grace Neill's Inn.² And the records show that in 1698 the Czar of all the Russias did indeed come to the British Isles to learn how to build great warships, so that he might establish a Russian navy. But Peter's tight schedule left him no time for an Irish detour, much less a pint (or should that be a large vodka?) at Grace Neill's.³

However, they say there is no smoke without fire, and the myth of the visit of Peter the Great may have its origins in a real historical event. More than a century later, the Russian Archdukes Nicholas and Alexander arrived at Donaghadee on one of the packet boats.⁴ However, there is no evidence that they visited the famous hostelry. It should also be pointed out that this visit took place in 1814 – four years before Grace Neill's birth, but romantics will never accept the dull truth.



Grace Neill, nee Jamieson, who was given the King's Arms when she married John Neill in c.1840. It is now universally known as 'Grace Neill's'. (Tom Neill Collection)