

# BOATBUILDING NEAR LOUISBURGH

JOHN MCHALE<sup>1</sup>

## HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

For those readers who have never heard of Pulgloss, it is a beautiful village three miles west of Louisburgh, nestled between the northwest side of Carramore hill and the south western shore of Clew Bay. “Poll Glas” is literally translated as “Green Hole” and many’s the time our schoolfriends from other villages reminded us of that English name! I prefer to think that when our ancestors used the word “poll” in placenames the meaning they intended was “valley”! Anyway, from about 1840 to 1890 a thriving boat building business was located at the west end of the village, and it is this little bit of the history of our parish and county that I want to record here, before it slips away into obscurity.

My great grandfather, John McHale, was born in Doughmakeon in 1813, “two years before the Battle of Waterloo” as we were told when we were young. His father had come from Lahardane as a travelling carpenter years before and married into a small farm. From the experience he gained working with his own father, young John soon began to make tables, chairs, forms and dressers for people all over the area. He had got a good basic education in the hedge-school in Doughmakeon<sup>1</sup> and around 1834 we know that he got work on the construction of the new Cathedral in Tuam, which was finished in 1836. That year he married a Maxwell girl whose father, Andy, had a small farm of about 10 acres in Pulgloss, and went to live there. I think he must have had a good look at the lie of the land before he married, because it was almost perfect for boatbuilding! The place he selected was about 100 yards above the shore with a good fall for taking the boats down to the sea. The only problem (and it was a major one) was that the shore in that part of Pulgloss is facing north northwest and is completely exposed to the wild Atlantic and the enormous swells that often break right over the lower part of “Dearg Aill”, the red cliff.

By the early 1840s there was a young girl and a baby boy in the house and John was repairing boats in order to supplement the meagre farm income. Word of his work reached the Marquis of Sligo in Westport House when he had a yacht badly damaged and in need of repair in Killary Harbour. It was the reputation gained in completing that job to the delight of the boat owner that finally gave him the push to set up a boat yard in Pulgloss. The Maxwells and our immediate neighbours the McNamees had come from Northern Ireland in 1796 and had started sewing flax. In 1846 a batch of flax caught fire when it was being dried in the old Maxwell house and it was burned to the ground. They set about building a new house, in the spot where the farm buildings now stand. They put sheds beside it for storing timber and a high wall surrounding a yard, 40 foot square, at the sheltered south end of the house where boats could be built in earnest. It was an average sized thatched house, but with the whitewashed sheds and yard alongside it looked a lot bigger, giving rise to the nickname “Lighthouse Sheáin Mhic hÉil”.



Old house at Pulgloss c. 1950. The boatyard was behind the barn at left.

With a population at the time of the famine of the 1840’s of over 8 million, there was a huge demand for food of all description and at that time the seas off our coasts were teeming with fish. More and more people turned to the sea and fishing so they needed boats. Currachs were in use and were

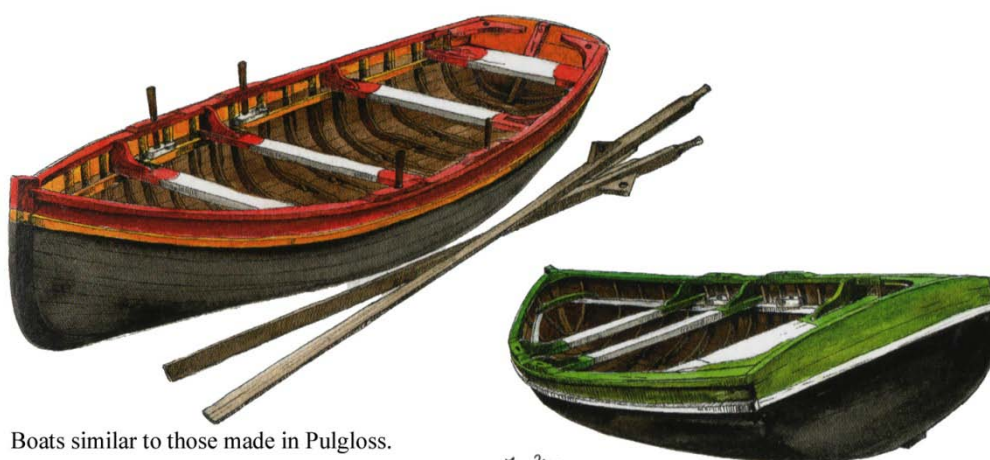
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<sup>1</sup> John Lyons in his meticulous research for “Louisburgh. A History” (1995) tells us that in 1835 the hedge school at Doughmakeon had an average of 30 - 40 pupils per day in attendance, studying reading, writing, arithmetic and catechism. The children paid from 6 pence to 8 pence per quarter.

very suitable for exposed shores where they could be carried above the high water mark, but larger, heavier boats made it possible for fishermen to go further afield, especially in winter when pollock and mackerel weren't so easily available. It was to meet this demand boats were built in a tiny corner of Kilgeever Parish for the next 40 years.

## THE BOATS

The type of boat that was built in Pulgloss was similar to what is today known as the “currach ádhmaid” in Connemara, but a little heavier. About 18 to 22 feet long, it is built on a full oak keel running the length of the boat, with oak ribs and heavier planking than the traditional currach which was usually only 16 or 17 feet long at that time, for ease of carrying. Instead of tarred canvas, the planks were cut to a fine tolerance so that they almost touched each other all along the side of the boat. This type of construction was referred to as “carvel” and required the thin gaps between planks to be caulked with hemp and tar to make them watertight. When the boat was launched the planks would swell and the boat would be perfectly dry, for a year at least, until it needed fresh caulking. The hull was also painted with a thin tar to protect the timber. Some of the tar is still visible on the back wall of the old house in Pulgloss where they often put a few brush strokes on the wall to make sure it was right.



Boats similar to those made in Pulgloss.

From Donal MacPolin's sketch in *Traditional Boats of Ireland*

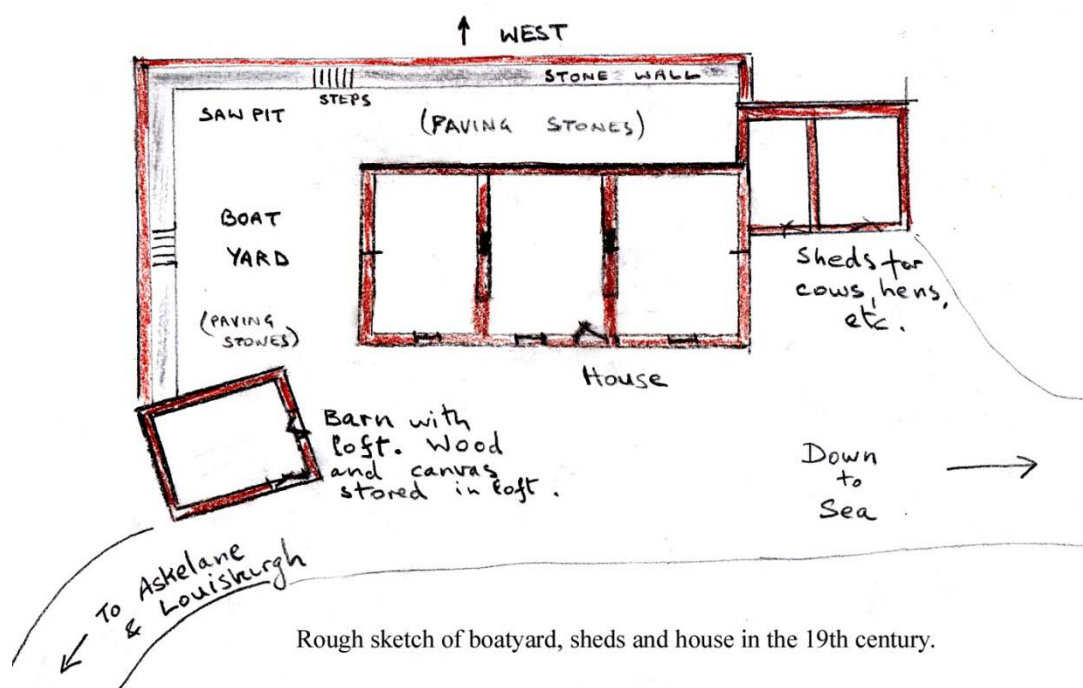
The boats were built upside down, with the planks nailed on to the ribs using copper nails. There was a “saw-pit” for rough cutting of all timber. Two men were employed in the saw-pit, one at the top of a six-foot stone wall, and one at the base. They used a long two-man saw with a wooden handle at both ends to cut the wood to shape. Each piece of wood was then shaped precisely to fit against its neighbour by the boatbuilder himself (or “boatwright” as he preferred to be known), using planes and spokesheaves. The ribs had to be shaped to the round profile of the boat by steam. They were put into a wooden box which was closed at both ends except for a pipe taking steam into the box from a pot sitting on a turf fire. The steam made the wood pliable so that it could be bent without cracking - a vital skill for giving strength to the hull. Drilling of large holes was done using an “augur” - a long drill bit with a hole at the top to take a wooden handle for turning it. There were still several augurs, gimlets, saws, planes, spokesheaves and other tools in Pulgloss when I was a child.

As well as the wood, the boats had several parts made from wrought iron by the local blacksmith, the ancestors of the Sammin family of Askelane. The rudder hung on “gudgeons”, circular iron sockets on the boat's transom, and was attached using “pintles” or iron pins. On the less common sailing versions there were other wrought iron fittings to connect the shrouds or stays for the mast, etc. I'm not sure where they sourced the wood, but I recall something about it being brought by sea from Westport to the beach at Pulgloss and carried up to the yard by mare and cart. A newly finished boat was launched by rolling it on thin poles down the road to the beach with a couple of men holding it on either side. The children's job was to grab the poles from behind the boat as it moved along, run to the front of it and put the poles down so that it could keep moving at all times. Repairs were always done wherever the damaged boat was lying.

Most, but not all of the boats were made for rowing. There were three or four “thwarts” or seats for rowers, each using two oars. As these boats were bigger and much heavier than currachs, they needed at least three rowers for going any distance other than a short fishing trip. My father, who remembered rowing our own boat when he was young, said that it took a good bit of effort to get it going but once it

started moving it was easy enough to row. Because it had a long straight keel projecting about three inches below the hull, it was easy to keep it going in a straight line and needed less effort in this regard than the currach.

The big disadvantage of this type of boat though was the weight. You couldn't just turn it over and carry it like a currach. It needed four strong men to lift it a few inches off the beach and move it painstakingly, step by step, yard by yard, up above the high water mark. If the weather was unpredictable it would be necessary to bring it a long way above that again. Many was the boat that was smashed or taken out to sea by a big swell during the "equinoctial" gales of Spring and Autumn. My grandfather's boat, one of the last to be built in the yard in Pulgloss, was broken up around 1915 by a huge wave in the middle of an unexpected Atlantic swell. It had been left in a sheltered spot at the bottom of the road, about thirty yards above the high water mark. Another boat was washed out from Garraí an Bháid (a lovely sheltered spot at the eastern end of Dearn Aill in Pulgloss) and was found a few days later almost undamaged near Mulranny.



Where these boats came into their own was for long fishing trips or for carrying animals or cargo to and from the islands. They didn't need a harbour and they could take a lot bigger load than a currach. James Jimmy O'Malley (from Bun na Thíairín, Accony) remembered a Pulgloss-built boat that was based in Roonagh in the early years of the twentieth century which often went to the Bills in settled Summer weather with a crew of four. During the day, after the gruelling fourteen mile journey, they would set a trammel (a type of net) and fish for the rest of the day with hand-lines for cod, pollock, coalfish, ling, haddock, gunners (wrasse) or mackerel, all of which were plentiful at the time. They would sometimes stay the night on the rock in fine weather, before coming back to Roonagh with a good haul of fish. Likewise my family often talked about the Friels who kept a similar boat at the pier in Carramore, only five minute's walk from their home. They too rowed all the way to the Bills for fish - seventeen hard miles each way.

## THE CURSE

The Pulgloss boats were prized for their build quality and their sea-keeping abilities. They were built for customers from Inishbofin and Inishturk in the south to Islandmore and Westport in the east. Clare Island and Achill boats were mainly built by the O'Malley family of Corraun, who had a yard and facilities to build larger yawls. Around 1850 my great grandfather built a sailing boat in Pulgloss for Seán MacNamara of Inish Bearnáin, a small island (now unoccupied) at the mouth of the Killary. He was originally from Devlin, and would have been well known to my great grandfather who was born in Doughmakeon. One terrible day as Seán watched the tragedy unfolding from the safety of dry land, his boat was blown off course coming home from Inishturk. His only son Anthony was at the helm as the gale swept them towards the "Skye" (or headland) of Emlagh. There was no hope of a boat like that being able to sail into the wind, and anyway their sail was probably blown to ribbons by the

time they neared the land. If they could have steered a more northerly course they would have been fine; unfortunately they were driven on to the jagged rocks just north of the Skye, an area marked on the chart as “Foul Ground”, where they all perished. Seán wrote a poem to lament the loss of his only son.<sup>ii</sup> It was later found in his house on Inish Bearnáin along with other poems that he wrote, and is still considered one of the finest laments in the Irish language. The poet curses Tom Seán (a whiskey maker) as well as “Mac Hael a rinne an bád”. The curse was often talked about in our house when I was a boy, but usually in hushed tones and always, I felt, with a dread that one day it might come to pass.

In 1854 John’s first wife had passed away and he had a seventeen year old daughter, Margaret, and a son a few years younger. Margaret decided to emigrate to America, and picked the booming city of San Francisco for her final destination. Gold had been found near by a few years before and the city was full of all sorts of people selling their wares and their services to the miners. The Sisters of Mercy sent over a team of nuns from Cork in 1854 to found a convent. It was said that Margaret wanted to join them. She travelled to Liverpool with another older girl from a nearby village, a long journey at the time, and from there they sailed for New Orleans in the sailing clipper “Euroclydon”. They both arrived safely in November 1854 but Margaret was never seen again after she disappeared into the crowd on the dockside. Her broken-hearted father organised a search for her and two and a half years later, in desperation, he placed an advertisement in the “Boston Pilot” newspaper asking for news of her<sup>2</sup>, but nothing was ever heard. The following year he re-married, but he vowed that if they had any more daughters he would keep them in Ireland. In the following decades four girls would be born in the house in Pulgloss that Margaret left from; they married in Inishturk, Islandmore and Falduff.

## THE DECLINE

All through the 1850’s, 60’s and 70’s boatbuilding continued, always supplemented by furniture-making, farming and fishing. In 1862 when the new Catholic chapel was being completed in Louisburgh town, John was contracted to make the confessional boxes. People of my own age will remember them; dark wood, highly ornamented, sticking out from the walls into the seats, one on each side. He was pelted with scraws late one night on his way home on horseback through Carramore but he could not see who it was. The theory at the time was that the devil was trying to prevent him from working on the new chapel! More than likely it was some other disgruntled carpenter who had failed to get the contract. There were a few very lean years in the 1880’s when the potato crop failed again but on a much smaller scale than in the forties. Our nearest neighbours, Tommy and Barney McNamee, born in Pulgloss of Fermanagh parents, emigrated to America, and their few acres were added to our own. They sowed turnips successfully in the best field just under McNamee’s old house, a crop that was just being introduced to the west at the time, and it provided a good source of food.

In 1891 the Congested Districts Board was set up “to alleviate poverty and congested living conditions in the west of Ireland”. One of its main aims was to develop a fishing industry using much larger boats, capable of going longer distances offshore and less dependant on weather. The Board gave grants and loans to fishermen for “nobbies” - lovely sailing boats about 35 to 50 foot long, which needed good harbours to keep them in. This very quickly put paid to the Pulgloss boat-building. My grandfather, Anthony, continued to build one or two in the 1890’s, including one for himself, and my granduncle, Walter, built a few in Louisburgh town but the demand was gone. From then on the currach became dominant around the shores of our parish. Its lightness and affordability made it the ideal choice for fishing on Clew Bay and inshore waters. In 1954 my father, James, built a currach, the last boat built by a member of my family. She was a beautiful, buoyant craft, fashioned with great love and attention to detail over many winter days and nights. Around 1961 she, too, was destined to go to the sea in a big Atlantic swell, but not before she gave our family lots of wonderful happy days fishing with our neighbours the McDonaghs and Durkans, as well as visitors from all over the world. But in 1976 the sea gave something back - a fine 23 foot ship’s lifeboat was washed ashore right at the bottom of the road in Pulgloss. Almost undamaged, it had been launched from the “New England Hunter” off Cork when there was a fire in the engine room (luckily the crew got the fire under control but the lifeboat was washed away). My brother Anthony got a rope on to it and kept it there until the tide went out. He spent many happy hours fishing with it, and many days dredging oysters with the late Paddy O’Toole of Roonagh.

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<sup>2</sup> The advertisement read: “Margaret McHale, daughter of John McHale, boat builder of Louisburgh, parish of Kilgeever Co. Mayo, who sailed from Liverpool on the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> of Sept. 1854 on board ‘Euroclydon’, Captain Fely, bound for New Orleans. Information received by her cousin Thomas Tierney, Altoona, Blair Co. PA”.



Inishturk currach built by Tony O'Toole in 1994

There are a few people in neighbouring villages who have turned their hands to the craft of currach-making, turning out beautiful sea-going boats. Tony O'Toole of Inishturk built the currach that is closest to my own heart. It is a magnificent boat, 19 feet long, sleek, strong and fast, with the maker's mark in every board and complicated joint. It has taken us safely from Pulgloss, Carramore and Roonagh to the old Clew Bay fishing marks, to Islandmore, Achill, the Bills, Clare Island, Meemore, Mweelaun, Caher, Baile Beag, Inishturk, Inishdealla, Killary Harbour and more or less every cove in between. My hope in writing this article is that future generations will remember and treasure the boatwrights of our parish and county.<sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> The author was born in the house illustrated on page 1 in 1946.

<sup>ii</sup> The poem "*Antoine MacConmara*" by Antoine's father, Seán, is quoted here in full.

Tá sgoith Imligh in inní ó rinne sí an t-ár,  
Tá do mhuintir a' chuimhniú ort de oíche is de lá,  
Ní raibh cuimsiú an t-inntleacht a' gabháil an bháid  
Ach suaimhneas go bhfágá t'intinn í bhflaithe na ngrást.  
Fuairéas tuairisc a d'fhág buartha mé í gcaitheamh mo shaol  
Gur fuadaigheadh ó thuaidh thú de Charraig Mhic Aodha,  
Bhí an uair ann ar fuagraigheadh dhuit flaithis na naomh,  
Ach dhá ngluaisteá sáthach luath bheitheá slán í gcaladh í dtír.  
Sé mo léan géar nár éag mé sul dá bhfaca mé an t-ár;  
An ceathrar in éineacht ag iarraidh reilig an tráigh,  
Chaill mé mo radharc agus, mo léan géar, tá mo mhisneach as lár,  
Agus arís go lá an tSléibhe ní éileóchá mé eangach nó bád.  
Sé fuisgí Tom Sheáin a d'fhágaibh mise gan mac;  
Ní fheicfead go bráth ar tráigh ná ar tuile thú ag teacht,  
Sé mo chreach is mo chrádh bhí do bhád ag imeacht sa bhfeacht,  
Ní fhilfir go bráth agus d'fhágaibh sin mise faoi lear.  
A Antoine, nach bodhar thú nach gcluineann mo ghlaoidh?  
Agus mé ag ordú thrí mo chodladh bheith leat insa tuinn;  
Fir an domhain agus fágaim roghain orthú go dtiubhrfainn slán thú í dtír,  
Ach táim tuirseach agus ní fhágaim codhladh agua tá tusa de mo dhith.  
Mo mhallacht-sa féin do Mhac Haeil a rinne an bád  
Nár aithris dom féin go raibh an t-éag ina chodhladh sa chlár,  
Ní leigfinn thú féin dá gaobhar ar tuile nó ar tráigh,  
Ach mo léan géar gur éag thú ar Chaladh Ruadh 'n Agha.  
Nach truaigh mé ar bord cuain agus gan mo charaidh le gloach,  
Buille gualann ní bhuaifidh dhom go deire mo shaol;  
Chaill mé an cluanaidhe ba suaimhní dár choidir tú ariamh,  
Agus tá an buaidhreadh de mo shíor-chuartú agus ní mhairfe mé mí.

<sup>iii</sup>

For more details of boatbuilding in Ireland, there is a marvellous book "*Traditional Boats of Ireland. History, Folklore and Construction. Ár mBáid Dúchais*", edited by Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh and published in Cork in 2004 by The Collins Press. It is full of photographs, diagrams and articles by expert boatwrights and sailors such as Paddy Barry, Jarlath Cunnane, Padraic de Bhaldraithe, Brian Ó Carra, Pádraig Ó Duinnín, and many others. See also [www.tradboats.ie](http://www.tradboats.ie) - a mine of information on the same subject.