

# SIR JOHN PURSER GRIFFITH (1848-1938)

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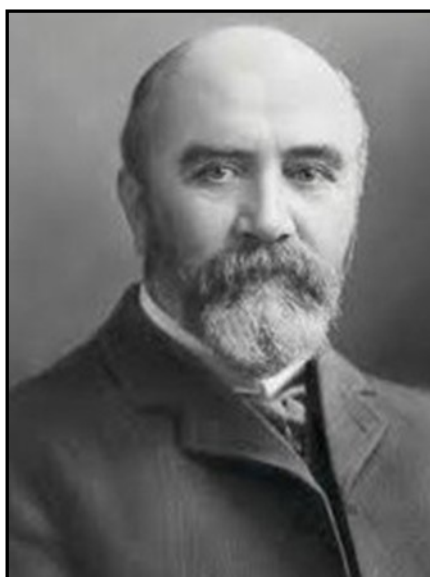
I'm sure that many of us have over the years travelled from Holyhead to Dublin by ferry, and have been impressed by the size, the scale and the activity of Dublin Port. However, how many of us are aware of the fact that much of the engineering work done in the port in the years before the Great War, was in fact done by a Holyhead-born man.

John Purser Griffith was born on the 5th October 1848, at Holyhead. He was the son of the renowned Congregationalist minister, the Rev. William Griffith (1801-1881) and Alicia his wife, who lived at Garreg Domas. As a young boy John had originally intended to become a sailor, but his mother apparently objected to this choice of career. However, growing up in Holyhead at the time when the new harbour and breakwater were being built, he soon found his true vocation in life. He began to take a lively interest in the work of the builders and engineers based in the town and decided that he would also become a civil engineer.

He was educated at Dr. Biggs's school, Devizes and Fulneck Moravian School at Leeds before going on to study engineering at Trinity College, Dublin, in 1865. After qualifying at the Engineering School in 1868 he began working with the eminent Dublin Port engineer, Bindon Blood Stoney. He then served for a brief period as an assistant surveyor in County Antrim, before being appointed assistant to Dr. Stoney in 1871, with whom he served for 28 years.

When his mentor retired in 1891, Griffith was appointed Chief Engineer to the Dublin Board Authority - a position he held till 1913. Griffith, was at this time, involved in the development and expansion of the North Quay of Dublin Port, which now made it possible for large vessels to dock at Dublin, rather than having to use the harbour of Kingstown or Dún Laoghaire, seven miles to the south of the Irish capital.

The incredible work on the North Wall was done by using enormous concrete blocks weighing about 360 tons. These were built on dry land, and when set, were lifted and transported by a floating crane, and deposited on the Liffey River bed. The foundations



Sir John Purser Griffith

were levelled by men working in a large diving bell, who entered through a tube fitted with an air-lock. This diving bell can still be seen on the Sir John Rogerson Quay in Dublin. By the turn of the century Griffith was without doubt, Ireland's leading civil engineer, and in 1887, became President of the Institution of Civil Engineers in Ireland.

Griffith was also involved in engineering projects outside Dublin. He was an advisor to the Government on harbour works at Wicklow and Arklow and was a member of the Commission involved in building bridges over the Suir at Waterford and the Shannon at Portumna. In 1906 he became a member of the Royal Commission on Canals and Waterways, and in 1913, Griffith was elected a Commissioner of the Irish Lights, which dealt with the lighthouses, beacons, and buoys around the coast of Ireland.

In 1911, Griffith was knighted for his services to engineering in Ireland.

After he retired from the Dublin Docks and Harbour Board he became chairman of the Irish Peat Inquiry Committee in 1917-1918 and also the Water Power Resources of Ireland sub-committee appointed by the Board of Trade in 1918. After Ireland gained

independence, Griffith, was in 1922, elected to Seanad Éireann. Here he was able to give the leaders of the new Free State valuable guidance on engineering matters, and in 1936, he was rewarded for his efforts by the City of Dublin, who granted him the Freedom of the City.

In this period, he also became an innovator in the Irish electricity industry. In the opening decade of the twentieth century he was involved with the Leinster Carbonising Company. In 1919 Dáil Éireann, the Irish lower house of parliament, set up a 'Commission of Enquiry into the Resources and Industries of Ireland', and the subsequent report recommended experimenting with the use of peat for electricity production. In 1924 Sir John decided to implement, at his own expense, the recommendations of the report, and he purchased a peat-bog at Turraun, County Offaly. He imported German peat excavators and built a peat-fired power station. This was yet another aspect of his pioneering work as an engineer.

Despite his work throughout the length and breadth of Ireland, Sir John Griffith's name will forever be linked with the capital city of Dublin. He had been educated at Trinity, and had strong family, social and religious connections with the city. His parents, William and Alicia Griffith, were both descended from the Griffith family of Drws y Coed Uchaf, Beddgelert; a prominent Moravian family, and several members of the Drws y Coed family had settled in Dublin in the early years of the nineteenth century.

There was also a strong connection to the Dublin Purser family. His father was a close friend of John Tertius Purser, of Rathmines Castle; a prominent member of the Moravian community. In fact, John Purser Griffith owed his middle name to this longstanding friendship between his father and John Tertius Purser. Another member of this family was Dr. Richard Biggs, who had married Sarah, Tertius Purser's sister, who ran the school at Devizes, Wiltshire.

Five generations of Pursers had worked as senior brewers with the Guinness Brewery in Dublin and had

become partners in the company in 1820. Tertius joined the Brewery in 1830, and when the company went public in 1886, he retired, and was able to invoke an agreement which would pay a shilling a barrel on all output since 1780. As a result of this agreement, he was paid the incredible sum of £217,196. From now on the Pursers became one of Dublin's most prosperous families.

It came as no real surprise when in 1871, John Griffith married a Purser. Anna Benigna Fridlezius Purser, was the daughter of Tertius. They eventually had two sons, John William Griffith and Frederic Purser Griffith, and a daughter, Alice. By the opening decade the family had moved to the magnificent Rathmines Castle, which was by then, an island of Welshness in the Irish capital.

The five female servants, who worked in the Castle, were all born in North-West Wales. Mary Parry, the housekeeper, was from Bethel, Caernarfonshire, and the other four domestic servants all hailed from various parts of Anglesey.

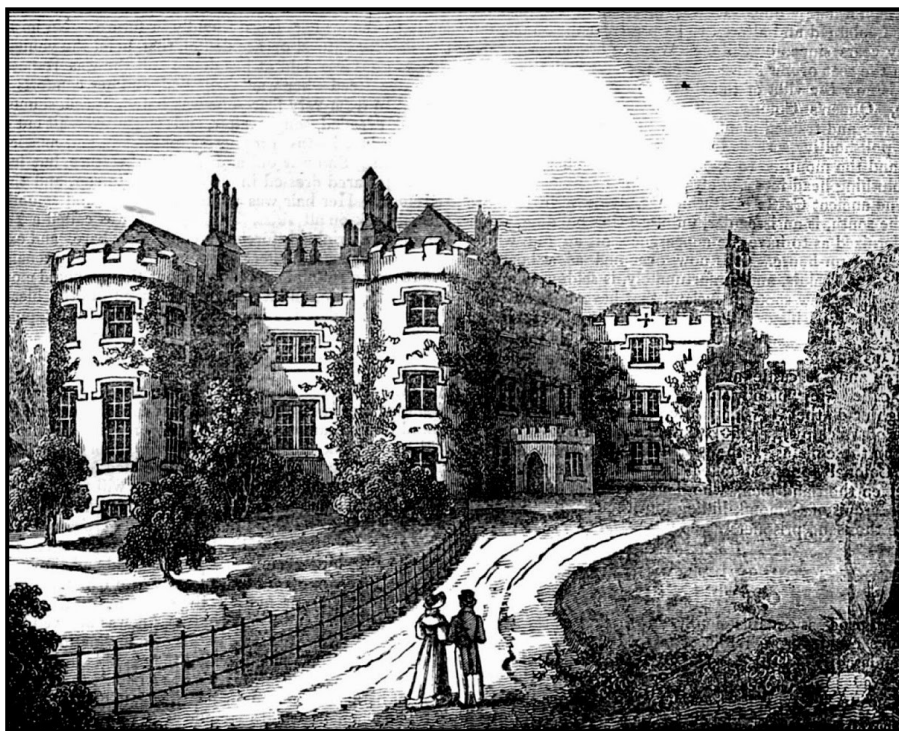
But these women were not just servants. One Anglesey minister clearly remembers visiting Sir John at the Castle. 'I remember' he recalled, 'on one occasion Sir John asking us if we would like to meet his 'friends'. And he then took us to the Servants Hall, where there were five young women, who were not only his domestic servants, but also his 'friends'.  
(translation) *Y Goleuad* 23  
*Tachwedd 1938*

Eight people in all lived in Rathmines Castle in 1911 as can be seen from the summary of the 1911 census return opposite.

Anna died the following year at Rathmines Castle, and it was Sir John who now inherited the Purser family's incredible fortune. He used the money wisely and was a generous philanthropist.

He is still remembered as a great supporter of all things Welsh. He gave his support to the Dublin Welsh Society, founded in 1902. In 1908 he donated £100 to the UNCW Bangor's New Building Fund, and in 1917 gave the Congregationalist College Library, Bangor a valuable collection of Greek and Latin books.

And despite the fact that he was a Moravian, John Griffith was a staunch



Rathmines Castle (above)

Summary Of the 1911 Census Return (below)

John P. Griffith	Civil Engineer	62	Moravian	Wales
Anna Griffith		73	Moravian	Dublin
Alice Griffith		34	Moravian	Dublin
Mary Parry	Housekeeper	38	Congregationalist	Wales
Catherine Williams	Housemaid	29	Congregationalist	Wales
Elizabeth Roberts	Parlourmaid	20	Methodist	Wales
Ellen Eames	Cook	24	Methodist	Wales
Sarah Owen	Kitchenmaid	20	Methodist	Wales

supporter of the Welsh Chapel in Dublin. The Calvinistic Methodist chapel in Talbot Street had always been a small religious community, but John Griffith was an incredibly generous benefactor. He was not a member at Talbot Street, but he used to donate £50 annually to the cause, and in 1913, he gave the chapel another £500 in order to purchase a house for the minister at 49, Home Farm Road, Drumcondra.

Sir John and Alice his daughter was present at the chapel on Wednesday the 7th June 1916 when Mary Parry, their housekeeper, married the Reverend Owen Selwyn Jones of Deganwy. Mary Parry had been in service with the Griffith family since 1899.

In 1936, Sir John Purser Griffith was rewarded for all his efforts when he was given Dublin's highest accolade. He was granted the Freedom of the City. Two years later, on October 21, 1938, Sir John Purser Griffith, the 'grand old man of Irish engineering' died shortly after celebrating his 90th birthday. He was buried in Whitechurch Moravian cemetery.

Sir John Purser Griffith was a great engineer and a great Dubliner. He must also be regarded as one of the greatest men ever born and bred in the town of Holyhead. ■