

PLANES, TRAINS AND THE POSTMAN'S BICYCLE

# *The Stacumney Ambush, Celbridge, Co. Kildare 2 July 1921*

## Sensation Near Celbridge.

ALLEGED ATTEMPT TO BLOW UP  
TROOP TRAIN.

BIG CAPTURE OF EXPLOSIVES.

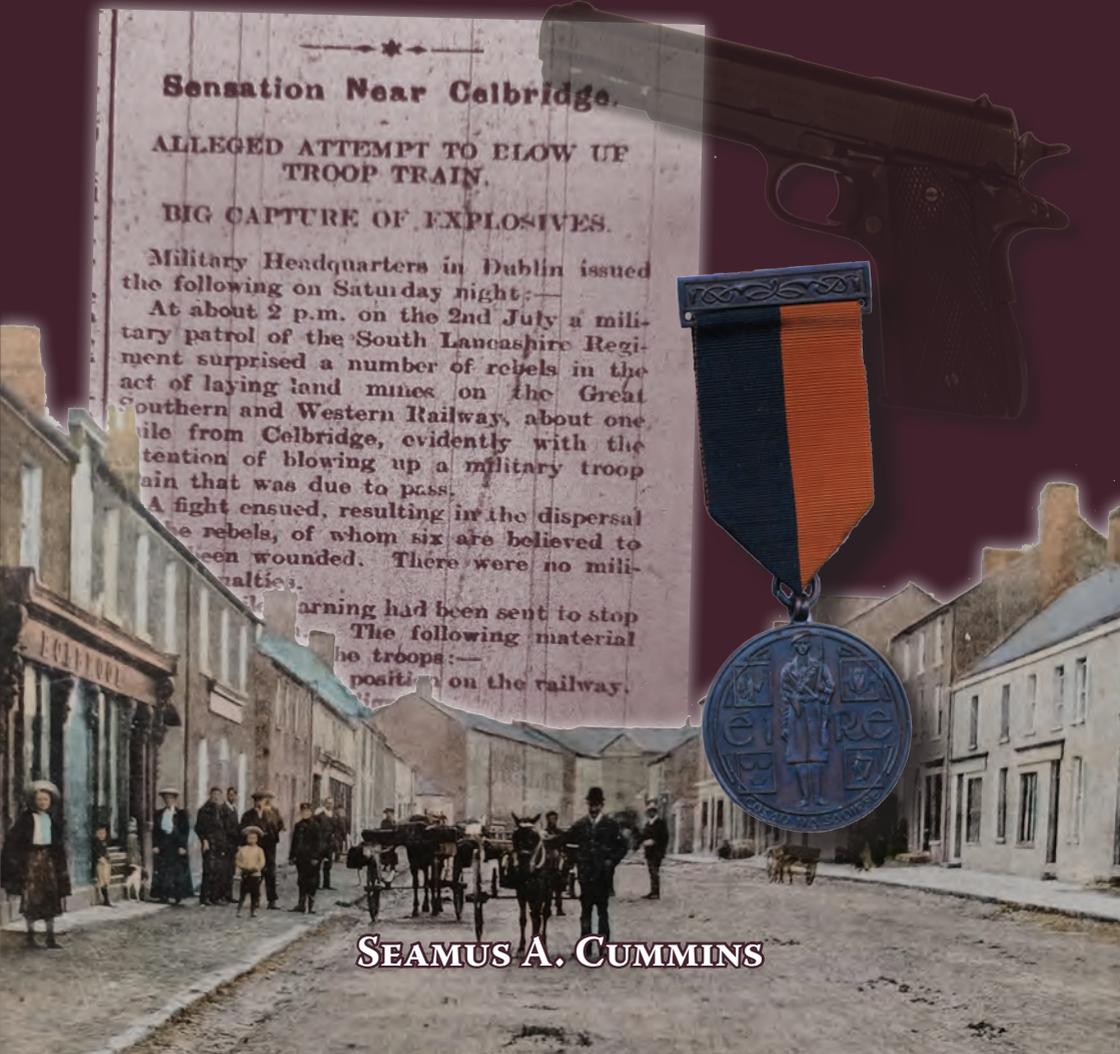
Military Headquarters in Dublin issued the following on Saturday night:—

At about 2 p.m. on the 2nd July a military patrol of the South Lancashire Regiment surprised a number of rebels in the act of laying land mines on the Great Southern and Western Railway, about one mile from Celbridge, evidently with the intention of blowing up a military troop train that was due to pass.

A fight ensued, resulting in the dispersal of the rebels, of whom six are believed to have been wounded. There were no military casualties.

A warning had been sent to stop

The following material was captured in the position on the railway.



SEAMUS A. CUMMINS

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**An Roinn Turasóireachta, Cultúir,  
Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán**  
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Kildare Local Studies

*Rear Cover Photo:*

Olive Wardell

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# Foreword

By the summer of 1921, the War of Independence, or Anglo-Irish War, was nearing cessation. The opening of the new Northern Irish parliament in Belfast (22 June 1921), marked the beginning of a new chapter in Irish politics: politically and culturally. In the south of the country, the Irish Volunteers, or Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.), were entering the last phase of the conflict with the R.I.C. and British military that had commenced in 1919. Both sides could at this juncture be referred to as 'war weary', with neither party having succeeded in delivering a definitive blow. It was an 'open secret' that on the eve of the Truce, the Volunteers could barely have lasted for three more weeks due to a chronic shortage of weapons and ammunition. It has been suggested that indeed three weeks was a generous estimation!

Both sides in the conflict would have become aware that there were developments taking place in terms of movement to a new phase: Political negotiation. The Volunteers throughout the country had been active throughout the 1919-1921 campaign in carrying out attacks on R.I.C. barracks, courthouses, communications infrastructure, tax offices, gentry estate houses and on convoys of police and military personnel. Yet despite these activities, the I.R.A. could not claim a comprehensive victory against the Crown forces. On the other hand, the authorities could not claim to have successfully defeated the Republican resistance entirely. As the Truce loomed nearer, it was anticipated that Republicans would mount a number of ambushes to inflict damage to the British side. Stacumney, a rural district near the town of Celbridge, Co. Kildare, was the scene of one such ambush in early July 1921.

The opening of the new Northern Ireland Parliament called for an increase in military troops to assist with the security operation. Many of these soldiers were based at the Curragh Camp and travelled through the county of Kildare by train. The railway, according to the I.R.A., provided a more favourable opportunity to stage a successful ambush. Stacumney is located adjacent to Hazelhatch where there is a train station along with a few bridges and third-class rural roads.

In this publication, Seamus A. Cummins presents an in-depth analysis of the background to the planning of the troop train ambush on 2 July 1921, the key personalities involved in the operation, the challenges they encountered and a very thorough description of the events that occurred and the aftermath.

As we mark the centenary of the Stacumney ambush, several key questions and issues remain about the event, some that after a century have not been fully resolved and make this even more intriguing. Firstly, the selection of the site has proven contentious over the years following the conflict and to a large extent by whom. This raises the question about those leading the campaign

from General Headquarters (G.H.Q.) directing operations in local areas they were not familiar with and often not consulting with I.R.A. leadership in such localities. The absence of Seán Boylan, Officer Commanding 1st Eastern Division, has promoted further scrutiny and may arguably relate to tensions between the Divisional Staff of the 1st Eastern Division and its 7th Kildare Brigade. Secondly, the context in which the Stacumney ambush was planned and how this was done is another contentious issue. The incident at Adavoyle, Co. Louth, where a military train was derailed with explosives inevitably sharpened the military's cognisance of such incidents and the potential for further episodes. R.A.F. military planes from the base at Baldonnell were regularly seen in Kildare carrying out reconnaissance patrols and escort duties and located close enough to the site at Stacumney. Thirdly, the discipline and conduct of those involved and security arrangements at the scene have been questioned. Was the perimeter left exposed? Why were scouts not deployed in a more strategic manner? Finally, the positioning of the Volunteers near the explosive charges was challenged and criticised by some who were involved and led to assertions of reckless conduct and that serious injuries and fatalities would have occurred among the volunteers should the explosives have detonated.

Seamus A. Cummins challenges these issues that have caused much debate and discussion throughout the years and assesses the significance and legacy of this event. The Stacumney ambush also highlights how active the I.R.A. were in Co. Kildare, especially in the north of the county. It also demonstrates the effective leadership and local knowledge of Patrick Mullaney, Battalion Commandant in North Kildare, whose diversionary attacks allowed the entire military strength of the 1st Eastern Division to return to base. This publication is an excellent resource for those who want to learn more about the Stacumney ambush and its relevance one hundred years on.

Michael Murphy  
Teresa Brayton Heritage Group  
20 May 2021

## Introduction

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In every conflict, military or otherwise, there comes a time when one side or another concludes that its best interests are served by a process of disengagement.

The essential problem then becomes one of conveying such information to the opposite side in a manner that avoids any imputation of weakness or surrender that may damage the morale of one's own supporters, or worse, encourage intransigence in the opposing side.

By May 1921 Prime Minister Lloyd George had come to the conclusion that British interests would best be served by bringing conflict in Ireland to a negotiated conclusion.

In November 1920 the British Parliament had passed *An Act to Provide for the Better Government of Ireland*, in effect the Fourth Home Rule Act, a conclusion to the Third Home Rule Bill deferred in 1914 on the outbreak of World War I. The intent was to provide two Home Rule Parliaments in Ireland, one for the six counties of Northern Ireland and one for the remaining twenty-six.

As far as public opinion in the twenty-six county area was concerned the Act was redundant and not sufficient to meet Nationalist and Republican expectations and was a complete failure as public opinion did not support its measures, electing Sinn Fein representatives to the Second Dáil instead.

But the terms of the Act did apply in the six counties of Northern Ireland (as the area was defined under the terms of the Act), from 3 May 1921, so that by June 1921 an elected parliament was in place dominated by Unionists, who were the majority population there, aided by a Nationalist refusal to recognise the Act and whose representatives took their seats in Dáil Eireann. As a result, a formal opening ceremony was required.

The official opening was set for 22 June 1921 and was to be performed by the Monarch, King George V. The ceremonial speech of the Monarch provided Lloyd George an opportunity to indicate that the British were open to negotiation. *"... I speak from a full heart when I pray that my coming to Ireland today may prove to be the first step towards the end of strife among her people whatever their race or creed. In that hope I appeal to all Irishmen to pause, to stretch out the hand of forbearance and conciliation, to forgive and forget, and to join in making for the land they love a new era of peace, contentment and good will ..."*<sup>1</sup>

In a choreographed response Lloyd George sent a public invitation to Republican leader Eamon de Valera to negotiate, appealing that, "... *The British Government are deeply anxious that, so far as they can assure it, the King's appeal for reconciliation, for peace in Ireland shall not have been made in vain.*"<sup>2</sup> As a result, what was termed "... *A rash of peace-making broke out on both sides of the Irish sea ...*"<sup>3</sup>

A Truce between both sides was declared, due to come into effect on Monday 11 July 1921. The prospect of negotiations and an end to hostilities led to renewed efforts by the IRA, determined to strengthen the position of potential negotiators.

*"... Certainly the IRA kept up the offensive ... On some it had a galvanic effect. Knowing that retribution could not occur after the 11th many literally eleventh hour warriors now took to the field ..."*<sup>4</sup>

It is in this context that the events at Stacumney, Celbridge, on 2 July 1921 must be assessed.

### **Targets of Opportunity**

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The State opening of the Northern Ireland Parliament and the presence of the Monarch necessitated huge expansion in security arrangements in Belfast with troop reinforcements brought in from the rest of the country, especially the Curragh Camp, the main military base in Ireland. At the conclusion of the ceremonies and the departure of the Monarch these troops had to return to their bases. The GHQ (General Headquarters) staff of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) saw obvious targets of opportunity as these troops transported by train, providing targets of massed troops of limited manoeuvrability if attacked. Disembarking from a train in face of attack was more difficult than from a lorry. Rail tracks were often below road level offering advantage to the attackers.

One such attack took place on 24 June 1921 some ten miles north of Dundalk, Co. Louth. Part of the Royal Escort for the Monarch's visit to Belfast, comprising 113 men and 104 horses of the 10th Hussars were returning to their base at the Curragh Camp. They were on the third of three troop trains leaving Belfast that day. At 10 am as the train passed over a high embankment about two miles north of Adavoyle station explosive charges were detonated under the train causing up to twenty rear carriages to crash down an embankment.

The troops were in the front portion of the train while the horses occupied most of the remaining carriages. As a result, the greatest casualties were among the horses slaughtered in the wreck or put down afterwards. Three soldiers and the civilian train guard were killed and four other soldiers injured. The resultant wreckage was spectacular and made such an impact that the wreckage was filmed by *Pathe News* and is available to this day.<sup>5</sup>

There is no record of any attempt to attack the train by gun fire. Had there been, the confused injured soldiers could have suffered heavy casualties.

The Adavoyle attack delayed troop movements by train for a time and both sides would have considered the results. The British were now aware that returning troop trains from Belfast were possible targets and would have to consider counter measures. The IRA would have to consider Adavoyle as an opportunity possibly not exploited to full potential due to a lack of concentrated fire being brought on the wrecked train. On the other hand, the potential to wreck a train by explosives was now demonstrated to be viable and within their capabilities. The stage was set for a repeat of Adavoyle should the opportunity arise.<sup>6</sup>

Repeating a previous tactic in a military campaign needs careful planning. Predictability in such instances can be fatal.

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### Planning the Stacumney Ambush

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That opportunity was to present itself at Stacumney, Co. Kildare, in July 1921. There are a range of witness statements (*Oglaigh na hEireann*, *Bureau of Military History*) *Bureau of Military History* and others, including MA/MSPC/A/57 (1), MSP34 Ref 35313, *Patrick Mullaney Military Pension Application* and press accounts of the Stacumney incident. Another source are the *O'Malley Notebooks* held in University College Dublin (UCD), which contain the references to Stacumney by Patrick Mullaney, the Officer Commanding (OC) the local 3rd Battalion, 7th Brigade, 1st Eastern Division of the Irish Republican Army.<sup>7</sup>

Seamus Finn who made a witness statement also left an account in the *Meath Chronicle*.<sup>8</sup> There is also a recollection of Mr. Robert Henry Wardell who was a witness to the events while a child of ten years of age.<sup>9</sup>

According to the *Witness Statement* of Seán Boylan, the plan to ambush a troop train at Stacumney came from Michael Collins himself. Boylan



Gerry and Henry Wardell in the yard at Stacumney Cottage, 1920s.  
Note J.N. Wardell Celbridge on the truck.

*Courtesy: Olive Wardell*



The railway bridge at Stacumney before demolition and replacement in 2007.

The view is facing towards Hazelhatch.

The bridge gave an excellent perspective on trains approaching from the Dublin side. The Finn-Mullaney group, including McGuinness with the Thompson gun were based here with Mullaney's armed group to the left as we view.

*Courtesy: Olive Wardell*

was the Commanding Officer of the recently reorganised 1st Eastern Division, IRA.<sup>10</sup> “... in June 1921, I was ordered to report at Barry’s Hotel, Dublin. When I got there I met Mick Collins, Gearoid O’Sullivan, Dick Mulcahy and, I think, Eamonn Price. A few days earlier, two troop trains had been sent from the Curragh to Belfast for the opening of the Northern Ireland Parliament by the King of England. One of those carried 700 men and the other 250. G.H.Q had decided that those trains be ambushed on the return journey. Mick Collins produced a map and, pointing to a spot thereon, suggested that one of the trains be attacked at this point. The name of the place was Stackumney (Sic). The times of the trains’ departure was known to G.H.Q. and the one selected for attack was the one carrying the 700 troops. Mick asked me to make preparations at once and advised me not to take part...”<sup>11</sup>

This is confirmed by Mullaney in his comments in the *O’Malley Notebooks* where he confirms Collins instigated the plan to ambush trains at Stacumney. Boylan does not mention Mullaney as attending although Mullaney claims he was there. Mullaney was a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) for Kildare however and he may have attended in that capacity, or indeed there may have been more than one meeting to discuss Stacumney attended by Collins and Mullaney. According to Mullaney, it was the divisional staff that picked the location for the ambush.<sup>12</sup> Stacumney is a townland east of Hazelhatch train station. Both are adjacent to Celbridge. The railway line from Dublin passes through Stacumney and then, as now, was a busy line. The residence and farm of the Wardell family in 1921 was adjacent to the line on the Dublin side of Hazelhatch station. Close to the Wardell residence on the Hazelhatch side was a road bridge over the line which afforded a very good perspective on both sides. The area around is crisscrossed with minor roads.

Given that the proposed ambush failed in its objectives and could have resulted in near catastrophe it may be significant that Seán Boylan, the Officer Commanding the 1st Eastern Division IRA, is at pains to make clear that his non-attendance was on the advice of Collins himself and that Collins specified the ambush site. The officer in charge at Stacumney appears to have been Seamus Finn, the Divisional Vice OC.

According to the *Witness Statement* of Boylan the details of the proposed ambush were planned by his divisional staff under his supervision in the Meath Brigade area and involved elements of the 7th Brigade based in North Kildare, the Fingal Flying Column and units from Navan as well as Dunboyne.

This leaves the responsibility for the preparation and execution of the ambush with himself and his divisional staff. Because he was not a witness to events Boylan's account concentrates on the main chronology and is a useful starting point. Statements from participants contain more detail and both supplement and expand his narrative. The ambush party initially mobilised in Dunboyne and numbered 100 men. *"... all armed with rifles and a couple of Thompson sub-machine guns, as well as a quantity of explosives including gelignite and tonite. The mobilisation took place on the night of 1 July 1921, after which they proceeded across country to Stackumney (Sic). On arrival, all of the party, except the engineers, occupied two houses near the selected spot ..."*<sup>13</sup>

Seamus Finn references Patrick Mullaney and the Leixlip men who were to make a significant contribution to events. *"... Sometime in June, I received a message from O/C Boylan that a very big operation was being attempted in the area and to pick about twenty of the most efficient men to take part. Soon I received the order to move and I arranged for Mullaney to bring these men in while I headed back to Dunboyne ..."*<sup>14</sup>

It is clear from further comments that the *twenty of the most efficient men*, were from Mullaney's organisation in North Kildare.<sup>15</sup>

Sources available to date can account for the two Thompson guns used. The two houses were Stacumney Cottage and outbuildings occupied by the Wardell family of Mr. J. N. Wardell and Stacumney House nearby.

The strategic importance of the Wardell building as a possible centre of operations must have been apparent from maps. It had the advantage of being very close to the railway line and nearby bridge, but it was also open to observation so that unusual activity could be noticed by the many trains passing. It would be essential therefore that strict discipline be enforced so that the occupying party drew as little attention to themselves as possible.

Mullaney provides more detail *"... All men in area were mobilised on the night of 1st July 1921 by direct order from Div. H.Q. and allocated to various duties in connection with a proposed ambush in the area ..."* Some were sent to Dunboyne to collect explosives and electric batteries. A large amount of explosive was transported and dumped for later use. *"... at 1.20 am men from other parts of Brigade area arrived and the local men had to guide them to the given positions ... The house of Miss Nugent was taken over as also Wardells, convenient to the railway. Some men were billeted in each ..."*

In 1903 Richard Nugent had purchased Stacumney House and lands. The large imposing residence was a short distance away from the Wardells

but on the opposite side of the road from them. It offered no view of the railway and was suitable as a billet only and is never mentioned again. The occupation of their property, Stacumney Cottage, must have been a terrifying ordeal for the Wardells occurring in the early hours of the 2 July 1921. The occupants at the time were, John Newton Wardell the owner, Chattie (Charlotte) his sister, Harry, George and Gerry, his three sons, and Doreen, his daughter.<sup>16</sup>

*"... We occupied the house owned by a Mr. Wardell who was far from friendly ..."*<sup>17</sup>

Wardell had a young family and found the privacy of his house and family disturbed in the early hours of that morning by a large number of armed men intent on placing explosives in the vicinity and engaging a large number of armed troops in battle. The possibility of his family and children being caught in a pitched battle involving such numbers of heavily armed forces, wherein his house was the command post for one of the opposing forces, must have been terrifying.

Reports throughout 1919-1921 of civilian casualties from such engagements were common. A successful attack causing British casualties, apart from likely damage to his home and farm buildings from explosions and crossfire alone, could leave the Wardells fearful of reprisals. The Wardells faced destruction of machinery and buildings and financial ruin as a possible consequence for them. It is entirely understandable that he should be anxious for the safety of his family and his anxiety interpreted as being less than friendly.

The priority was to lay the explosives to blow up the train and position men behind an embankment. The laying of the mines involved digging out locations fixed by the engineers and explosives experts as the most suitable. Again, Mullaney provides a detailed account. The engineers started work on mine laying at 5.30 am sixty yards from the railway bridge on the Dublin side with cables laid from the railway to Wardell's yard which he calculated was a distance of sixty-five yards. These calculations, if accurate, located the potential explosions very close to the residence.

*"Men were placed for observation purposes along the railway banks at points about 70 yards apart and some distance from the working party. A covering party was placed on the railway bridge from where the nearest man on observation could be seen and his signals received. Support parties were placed in railway cottage and in house beside the road. Men were also in signal cabins at Lucan and Hazelhatch ..."*<sup>18</sup>

Boylan's account is sparse, since he was not present and depended on a report of events, but he sets out a chronology. "... *The troop train was due at midday and, in the meantime, several trains passed up and down. Near midday a military aircraft reconnoitring the railway line in front of the troop train spotted our men in position and apparently conveyed the information to Baldonnell garrison, for a short time later, several lorry loads of military arrived on the scene and opened fire on our men. A short fight ensued, but our men extricated themselves without suffering any casualties ...*"<sup>19</sup>

Finn has greater detail on the planned execution of the ambush which would involve two trains due to pass the ambush site at 1 pm. "... *The order in which they were to come was: first a pilot engine, which would be 100 yards in front, then a small train carrying about 200 troops, and following this at about another 100 yards distance would be the main body of 800 officers and men. The whole staff of officers were to be on this train. Our instructions from G.H.Q. were to allow the pilot engine and the first train to pass and then to attack the main body ...*"

The evidence of Finn shows a high level of information which appears to have come from GHQ, another indication of the importance attached to the operation. Finn is specific that the explosives were to be the main method of attack. "... *It was intended to be an engineering operation, with the rest of our men covering them, but all were to open fire when the engineers had done their work ...*"

The main objective was to cause as many casualties as possible through explosives, the derailing of the train and then further casualties by raking the disorientated troops by fire from concealed positions, developing the tactic employed at Adavoyle. Some participants were to express reservations about how close they were placed to the explosives, which in turn raises questions as to the suitability of the ambush location, an issue that was to be raised later.

Finn organised the attackers in four sections of twenty men each, 1st Brigade, 2nd Brigade, the Fingal Column and the North Kildare section. "... *Mullaney and I had the Kildare men. He and I occupied the south side of the line and we were specially detailed to cover the engineers ...*"<sup>20</sup>

Ten explosives charges were to be laid over a two-hundred-yard section of track adjacent to the Wardell home. Mullaney and Finn placed their men to the south of the railway, the Meath and Fingal detachments were to the north and west. The Divisional Director of Engineering, Eamonn Cullen, was present. He was responsible not alone for detonation but also the care and securing of the scarce and invaluable exploder. Had

the plan worked there would have been mayhem as confused soldiers and officers would have been easy targets.

A successful operation would have sent the Irish side into the Truce with a historic military victory against the British Army who would have suffered heavy casualties. British public opinion would probably have hardened against involvement in Ireland, placing Lloyd George under considerable pressure to find a solution, weakening his position against the Irish side.

On the other hand, after Adavoyle the British now knew the IRA had the capacity to destroy troop trains in transit and would have been on guard against a recurrence. The layout of the British trains indicated a wariness following the Adavoyle attack. In hindsight this should have informed the planning of the operation.

One of the participants, Matthew Barry, relates how when he arrived men were already working with picks and shovels to lay the mines, and confirms that orders were given to rake the carriages with fire when the mines exploded. He admits to some misgivings that may not have occurred to the planners, *“... I do not know what type of mine was to be used, but I visualised the large solid concrete type which had been made up in every company area. I had a slight experience of the power of explosives and I began to think what our position would be if seven or nine such mines went up under a train right under our noses so to speak. Momentarily I could see pieces of carriages, mangled men and arms flying into the air and coming down on top of us, plus the shock we ourselves would get from the explosions ...”*<sup>21</sup>

Another participant, James Cunnigan gives some further detail. James Cunnigan was Battalion Adjutant Fingal 1919-1921 and at Stacumney was under the command of Patrick Mooney from Trim, Co. Meath. This group was twelve to fourteen men strong. They were equipped with rifles and fifty rounds of ammunition each. They came to Stacumney via Dunboyne where they billeted overnight in Murtagh's of Dunboyne. They reached Murtagh's at 9 pm as dusk descended. *“... a priest was in a room in the house and all of our men went to confession there ...”*

According to Cunnigan, before taking up ambush positions *“... We were served with breakfast at Wardells consisting of tea and a large cut of bread with a fried rasher on top ...”*

Cunnigan was ordered *“... To keep well down under cover of the embankment overlooking the railway on the west side of the bridge until the mines went off, when we were to come up and rake the carriages with rifle fire, aiming at the level of the seats ...”*, but like Barry he had fears as

to the safety of their position. *“... I had visions of carriages and pieces of soldiers flying through the air and descending on us who would be so close to the explosion. What the effects of concussion on us by the explosion would be I often wondered afterwards ...”*<sup>22</sup>

### **The Ambush Plan Unravels**

#### **Boots on the Ground, Eyes in the Sky**

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The trains were due at 1 pm and all were in their allotted places at mid-day; the engineers were in place, the explosives primed and ready. Boylan at this stage states that the ambush was surprised by an aeroplane. Finn who was present and in charge gives a more detailed account by far, *“... then we were amazed to see two big caged lorries packed with enemy troops come up behind us ...”* But Mullaney gives the crucial information as to how events occurred, *“... a party of military approached by a road which was left open. As they came near to the bridge and passing by Wardells gate the lorries were halted and immediately fire was opened on them from Wardells and from the bridge ...”*<sup>23</sup>

This raises the question as to why fire was opened on the troops by the IRA in Wardells. It may have been panic, and with hindsight a better option might have been to remain silent and hidden in hope the patrol seeing nothing untoward might pass.

The men on the northern section of the track, Pat Clinton the Divisional Adjutant, and Paddy Mooney with the Fingal contingent, were now exposed to fire caught in the open. Mooney and his men retired behind a wall while Clinton's section found what cover they could. Mullaney, Cullen and Finn were on position on the railway bridge. Finn ordered Mullaney to pull his men back across south of the railway and hold their position. Having carried out this order with efficiency Mullaney returned to assist Finn and others on the bridge. This group then moved south of the railway line outflanking the British troops engaging Mooney and Clinton and opening fire on them. Under this covering fire Clinton's section broke out to a more secure position while Mooney and his men held their position behind the wall. In the meantime, the engineers had to abandon their positions and take cover while the Wardell family and other prisoners remained at peril of death or serious injury.

Firing was now widespread, but Finn still held his position as the explosives were still in place and the opportunity still there to wreck

the trains and escape in the confusion. Finn, Mullaney and Cullen “... and a man who had been lent to us by G.H.Q. and who was armed with a Thompson gun ... named Magennis ...” returned to the bridge to observe events.

At this juncture Finn relates the appearance of an aeroplane which caused him to cease action until he assessed this new development. The appearance of the aeroplane changed the course of events completely. “... We had a clear view of the railway line for about ½ mile and this is what we saw. The Pilot engine came on and when within a short distance of the beginning of our minefield the plane swooped down in front of it, wheeled, turned and again swooped so low and close that the engine driver pulled up. Then we saw the first troop train coming, and the driver of it, seeing the pilot stopped, did likewise. Realising that our operation was now doomed to failure we ordered a general retreat, and it looked like as if it was going to be every man for himself...”

Mullaney confirms the importance of the covering fire from the bridge “All parties were given orders to retreat this being covered by men on bridge ...”<sup>24</sup> The placing of the North Kildare unit commanded by Mullaney south of the railway had proved crucial. They provided the outflanking and covering fire which allowed the engineers and the other units to escape. The situation was now critical. Troops were now disembarking from the trains, with a spotter plane keeping a watch on their movements. The ambush party now faced the prospect of being surrounded. There were troops dismounting from lorries and engaging with them from the west while up to one-thousand further troops could eventually disembark from the two troop trains now halted further down on the Dublin side of the ambush and advancing from the north.

Fortunately for them Royal Air Force (RAF) military technology had not then advanced to allow air to ground wireless communication so that the ability of the plane to communicate their positions was very limited, and the disembarking troops had to make up ground before they could engage. The Adavoyle ambush would have made them cautious of mines, slowing their advance further.

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### From the Jaws of Defeat

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Finn and his men moved fast and retreated in good order. Finn attributes this success to Mullaney “... we were lucky to have Mullaney as he knew

*the country well ... eventually Mullaney brought us to Leixlip. Here we held a miniature council of war and decided we'd head for Dunboyne, still moving across country ..."*

The different groups evaded British forces and made their way to Leixlip, and from there to Dunboyne and safety with no losses and no casualties other than a man who broke his leg in the initial scramble to escape capture. Mullaney led Finn and others through a wooded area which gave cover from surveillance from aeroplanes overhead. According to Finn they avoided a lorry patrol of Black and Tans who seemed unaware in their demeanour of what had happened in Stacumney. This may indicate that the British Army retained sole control of the movement of their troops and did not share information with the RIC for security reasons. In Leixlip Finn learned that Mooney and the Fingal men had passed through shortly before.

Mullaney aided the retreat as it proceeded throughout the evening and night of 2 July by persuading Finn to support his request to McGuinness to loan the Thompson sub machine-gun to the Leixlip company for the night, promising to return it to Dunboyne the following day. *"Before we parted with Mullaney, who resided in Leixlip, he called me to one side and asked if there was any possibility of McGuinness lending him the Tommy gun until the next day. After a good deal of coaxing he got it, promising to have it back at Dunboyne the following night ... That night with the country packed full of enemy troops, Mullaney and some of the Leixlip Company made a daring attack on Lucan RIC barracks which lasted over half an hour ..."*

This resulted in a diversion of British forces to the Lucan area taking pressure off the remaining stragglers who were using available cover to follow the route to Leixlip and Dunboyne. Roads free of British motorised patrols would have been of much assistance. The attack on Lucan Barracks was part of a wider process of disruption carried out by Mullaney and his men after Stacumney.<sup>25</sup>

One group with Commandant Matthew Barry that had not yet taken up position were caught in the yard to the rear of Wardells when the British patrol arrived and caught them off guard. Their position became critical. *"... We had almost reached the outer yard or middle gate when I was amazed to see a British army lorry stop dead on the road at the outer gate and five or six soldiers jumped from it and ran through the gate in our direction and immediately took cover behind a fold in the ground, while others jumping from the lorry took cover behind the road ditch and walls which were at the entrance gate ..."*<sup>26</sup>

Barry and his group were now caught in a fire fight with the British Army. He narrates exchange of fire, confusion and desperation as he tried to extricate himself, counting himself lucky that the British had no machine guns to hand or his group would have suffered heavy casualties. He took cover behind a gate pillar and with a nearby companion named Byrne returned fire. Soon he realised that the rest of the ambush party were retreating and Byrne and himself were isolated and alone and in great danger. *"... I knew that the troop train was due and estimated that there would be hundreds of troops converging on our rear ... I began to think of my mother and my people and my pals who I would never see again and to regret that I had not gone to confession the night before although I never thought of the next world ..."*<sup>27</sup>

Barry and Byrne managed to escape due to a burst of fire from the Thompson gun in the possession of the Finn-Mullaney group who had outflanked the troops arriving by lorry and who had covered Mooney and Clinton when they were pinned down. This distracted the troops engaging Barry and Byrne who made a dash towards the railway line through Wardell's yard and eventually reached the countryside.

Barry describes his escape, which must have been replicated by other retreating ambushers – manoeuvring through barbed wire, jumping ditches, linking up with other separated groups keeping to cover as much as possible. He describes being harassed by the spotter plane, refusing opportunities to fire on it for fear of giving away their position. *"... The pilot must have been a brave man, as he must have seen that we were carrying rifles and he was an easy target as he came low towards us. Likewise he must not have had any armament on the plane as if he had machine guns or even grenades, we would have been a lovely target for him ..."*<sup>28</sup>

According to Barry, the 2 July 1921 was very hot, so that the group was suffering severely from thirst and dehydration, their clothes ragged from jumping ditches and running through hedges. They made a decision to dump arms and ammunition, *"... We decided that if we were caught with the rifles, there would be no hope for us, but without them we might have a chance ..."*<sup>29</sup>

He meant by this that a conviction of carrying arms might still entail a death sentence and execution, indicating the growing concerns of the group. He comments that some of the group still had their full allocation of ammunition, implying that they had retreated without being able to fire a shot. It is difficult to trace the route taken by this party. Barry did not know the country and the events he relates had taken place



Mayo team. The picture was taken on the SS Manhattan on which the Mayo team – winners of the 1936 All Ireland – and selectors travelled to America in 1937. Patrick Mullaney was a selector and prominent in Mayo GAA for years. He is second row on right in the jacket.

*Courtesy: Sunday Independent 30/5/2010*



John Newton Wardell in the yard at Stacumney Cottage. The car appears to be a Siddley Armstrong. It may be the one the IRA intended to commandeer.

*Courtesy: Olive Wardell*

decades previously. He mentions at one point being close to Maynooth, and another time being close to Lucan. Eventually the group called to a house where they were given water and directions to Leixlip.<sup>30</sup>

Having reached Leixlip they were relieved to find the bridge over the Liffey unguarded, indicating they approached Leixlip from the Lucan-Cooldrinagh side. They crossed the bridge and moved through the village by the Main Street singly so as not to attract attention. They then got directions to Dunboyne which they reached safely that evening, some having diverted to Summerhill completing a successful withdrawal from peril of all the participants in the ambush.

The IRA seemed to have had some auxiliary support. Finn mentions a Nan Murtagh of Dunboyne who “... *got hold of a pony and trap and with the aid, I think, of her younger brother drove right through the whole fight with first aid outfits and a stretcher ...*” When she returned, Nan also brought intelligence that Clinton and his section had escaped safely. “... *How she got back to us was a mystery, but back she came with the consoling news that Clinton’s section had got through the enemy lines and were on their way here ...*”

Matthew Barry confirms that Nan Murtagh made her way to the area as the withdrawal progressed. He recalls she came upon his group near Leixlip and distributed chocolate and cigarettes while enquiring as to the safety of the men. She also undertook to secure transport for them. Barry refers to her using a bicycle as transport. Murtaghs was the Divisional Headquarters for the ambush.<sup>31</sup>

## What Went Wrong

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The discovery of the ambush, firstly by the British patrol prior to the appearance of the aeroplane raises some issues. It is possible that the movement of large numbers of men from Dunboyne and Fingal to the Leixlip area on a summers night when there was plenty of daylight could have been noticed.

An account by John Gaynor relates how his group made their way across country and passed through the village of Leixlip, “... *We passed through this village where everyone was apparently asleep and none bothered to see who we were. Yet I am sure there were many eyes peeping out of the darkened windows at us ...*”

Barry gives a similar account. “... *Eventually we came down a hill into*

*what seemed to be a village or small town ... As we tramped through, I wondered what was the reaction of the people who all seemed to be fast asleep. Our tramp, tramp, tramp made quite a din and echoed through the houses and it must have awakened some of them but not a sign life was to be seen ...*"<sup>32</sup>

It is more likely that since several ambushes had been mounted on troop trains in June 1921 particularly at Adavoyle, the British had taken care to protect these July trains, carrying large numbers of troops and officers. The lorry patrol which initially discovered the ambush could have been patrolling access sites to the railway line.

The fact that troops in the lorry had no machine guns, such as a Lewis Gun, indicates a routine patrol, and that they were not acting on information received. The troops in the lorries seem to be British, not RIC, Tans or Auxies, indicating an operation controlled by the British Army solely, thus maximising security of information.

The use of spotter planes from nearby Baldonnell Aerodrome (or Tallaght Aerodrome as it then was), would have supplemented this surveillance. This raises the issue as to whether operational planning could have been more thorough in anticipating a British response.

The Stacumney ambush was a development of the tactics at Adavoyle and carried the danger that the British would anticipate a similar attack. Perhaps scouts could have been placed further out from the ambush site to give greater notice by signalling of the approach of the patrol. Finn is emphatic that the ambushers to the north of the railway line were observed and that the British patrol opened fire. Greater emphasis on concealment and discipline as well as a wider scouting parameter to give warning of approach might have allowed the ambushers to conceal themselves and let a routine patrol pass on.

Should the planners not have considered that the movement of up to one-thousand troops would mean the British would consider the possibility of attack and look to previous events for a pattern and devise counter measures?

Barry makes telling criticisms in his statement, "*... It was, as far as I know, the first operation carried out by the Divisional Staff which had not long been formed and a very poor job they made of it. Looking back on it now, the whole thing seems to have been badly planned and badly controlled ... I do not know yet what type of mine was being used and still wonder what the effect of them would have been on ourselves as well as the enemy. I still wonder how lorries – I believe there were two – were able to drive right into the heart of the ambush position just at the wrong moment.*

*Security measures were sadly lacking here. I don't think Wardells, which was situated in the ambush position and lying alongside the railway, should ever have been occupied. Control here was very bad and although men were warned not to expose themselves, they were walking around the yard with rifles slung on their shoulders. Some of the city going trains were bound to have British officers, agents, or sympathisers on them who have observed the unusual activity around Wardells and perhaps armed men and they would have reported it when they got to the city which was only a few minutes run from there. It would have been better to keep the men some distance from the line and bring them up at the right moment. We could see the people in the trains as they passed by quite easily. We were not told that aircraft from Baldonnell, which was only a very short distance away, would be operating ...*"<sup>33</sup>

The comment about the aeroplane is telling. The RAF were increasingly used as a support to British troops on the ground in 1921 being used for patrols and escorting troop movements. They kept in communication by dropping message warnings or signalling in the absence of wireless communication. They were not unknown in Kildare. On 13 May 1921 the RAF carried out reconnaissance for ambushes throughout the county. On 19 May three aircraft escorted a convoy of prisoners from Dublin to the Curragh. More telling on the 25 June, seven days prior to the ambush, an aerial escort was provided for a troop train from Dublin to the Curragh.<sup>34</sup> The possibility of an RAF escort for the trains, seems to have escaped the planners of the ambush, despite their developing use throughout Ireland and particularly Kildare for escort duties.

The reference to the use of a Thompson sub-machine gun by various participants is noteworthy. The Thompson sub-machine gun was the cutting edge of military technology at the time, having been designed in America in 1919 by General John T. Thompson and manufactured by the Colt Fire Arms Company. The IRA were the first customers of the Thompson, due to agents in America such as Harry Boland. They were smuggled into Ireland in May 1921, accounts differing as to whether three or seven were smuggled and were first fired in action in an attack on a troop train in Drumcondra in June 1921.<sup>35</sup>

This makes the use of the weapon at Stacumney in providing covering fire and the attack in Lucan on the night of 3 July 1921 by Mullaney and his men historic and worthy of note, as their use in Ireland prior to the Treaty was rare. The supply of such a scarce and valuable weapon is an indication of the importance attached to the operation at the highest levels of the IRA.

There is no evidence of hot pursuit by any of the British which was a substantial aid to the escapers. The aeroplane could not communicate by radio and was confined to signalling general areas of IRA presence. The ambushers retreated rapidly and in good order with some able to dump arms securely for later collection. Both sides knew that a Truce was imminent and there would have been an understandable reluctance, especially on the British side, to earn the distinction of being among the final casualties of the Irish conflict.

Disembarking from a train at an unscheduled stop would have been slow and cumbersome, arranging the men in battle order took time, the countryside unfamiliar. Meanwhile, the ambushers were retreating at speed dispersed in groups. Caution was dictated by the understandable fear that the mines might yet explode by deliberate action or by accident.

### The Wardell Family

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The innocent and helpless victims of the situation remained the Wardell family, confined in close proximity to a series of landmines, and caught in a fire fight when the British troops surprised Barry and his group in their yard.

All of the groups making their way to Stacumney met at Wardells. Many of the outside participants were aware of the names of the owners indicating a level of shared information.

Gaynor relates coming to a medium sized residence close to a railway bridge. His description of the treatment of the Wardell family is stark, *"... We soon had the residents of the place routed out of their beds and locked up in the harness rooms in the yard. It was apparently the home of a loyal British subject, as it had pictures of the Royal Family and so forth on the walls ..."*<sup>36</sup>

It should be borne in mind that those *routed out of their beds* were George Newton Wardell, his sister and four children. Curiously, this account echoes an account from another participant, James Cunnigan, who states, *"... we entered a gentleman's house named Wardell. Immediately we routed the Wardell family from their beds and locked them in an out office under guard. It was apparent to us, from the number of pictures and paintings of the English royal family hanging on the walls that the Wardells were a loyalist family ..."*<sup>37</sup>

Barry states of the house, *"... It seemed to have lovely furniture and the*

*wall carried portraits of the Royal Family and such like. Strange to relate, no one seemed to have molested any of such articles. It was apparently the house of a loyal British subject. Some time in the early morning we moved around a bit more and out into the yard. Here a sentry of ours was on duty outside an out-office door, the harness rooms, I concluded. We were anxious to know what he was guarding and he told us that the family who lived in the house were prisoners in that room.”<sup>38</sup>*

The accounts are very similar in tone and language. It would not be unreasonable for old comrades preparing a witness statement to communicate with each other and confirm or fill in gaps in their recollections.

In Wardells, men took to the beds vacated by the family. Barry relates how when he arrived with his party a “*Bok Maguire*” and a man named “*Crinnigan*” were playing the Wardell family piano and entertaining the assembled company.

He may not have been impressed given that he assessed lack of discipline and security as a possible reason for the failure of the operation. It is clear from Barry’s account that poor security, discipline and planning were obvious to him, and if to him, then to others.

Robert Henry Wardell in his account many years later does not recall being locked in an outbuilding or the requisitioning of bedrooms or use of the piano. He describes the ambushers as courteous and sending food to the bedroom, where the entire family were detained indicating the family were not locked outside but held in one of their rooms. In his account he relates how one of the children Gerry (Gerard) who would then have been eleven years of age or so was spotted looking out a bedroom window by one of the guards and told he would have his head blown off if he did not get back.

Gaynor, Cunnigan and Barry are clear in their statements, the Wardells were taken from their beds and locked in an out office under guard. One possible explanation is that adults who arrived later to work on the farm and were detained in a farm building were confused in their recollections with the Wardell family. The allegations that the house contained portraits of the British royal family are puzzling. It is unlikely the Wardells would have had any illustrations of the British royal family in their residence. They were members of the Society of Friends, or Quakers, whose traditions refuse to defer to earthly hierarchy. Friends would be unlikely to decorate a residence with an image of a monarch.

Two residences were occupied as billets, the Wardells and the Nugents at Stacumney House, who were of the family of the ninth Earl

of Westmeath. Memories may over time have confused one with the other. *Witness Statements* made decades after an event must be treated with caution.

Witnesses may recall accurately, or in good faith, they also may recall as fact what they thought happened, or what was related to them afterwards. Events that happened in one location may be transposed to another, especially if locations are close by.

In the course of the morning of 2 July, as the ambushers waited in Wardells, a number of people called to the farm. Gaynor states, “... *A number of men, who looked like workmen, and a postman were brought in under escort and locked up as prisoners under guard ...*” Mullaney reports “... *the holding up of a postman ...*”<sup>39</sup>

Robert Henry Wardell gives the chronology in his recollection of events, which is probably a summary of the family recollection. “... *During the morning as the various farm labourers arrived for work they were locked up in the farm buildings as was the postman when he arrived at 11 o clock. Jack Johnson who was the steward (sic) on the other Wardell farm down the lane at Bellbrook sent up a man to collect a harrow & this man was promptly locked up. Jack Johnson then sent up Kate Newgent (sic) to see what happened to the 1st man & she was locked up. Jack Johnson decided to come up himself with two shire horses to see what was going on & was locked up also (with the horses). ‘Boy’ Wardell then came up & was locked up ...*” Boy Wardell was the son of Charles Edwin Wardell and Molly Wardell, formerly Crosbie. They had a farm at Bellbrook close to Stacumney Cottage, where the new Forensic Laboratories are now located.<sup>40</sup>

By now, as well as the Wardell family, there were four men, one woman, and two shire horses under guard in the general location. After the precipitate retreat and evacuation of the area the only extant account, in the absence of British army records is that of Robert Henry Wardell. Despite the exchange of fire between Barry’s group and the British patrol there were no casualties.

According to Robert Henry, “... *After about half an hour the shooting died down & the Wardells began to realise that everything was quiet in the house as the IRA had evacuated same ...*”

The situation was still tense, the British troops wary and anxious, and perhaps the Wardells a little foolhardy, “... *John Newton started moving around checking the rooms but was seen through the upstairs bedroom window by a British soldier who fired at him the bullet lodging in the wall near the door ...*”

The travails of Mr. Wardell were not over. "... *The British soldiers then made John Newton come out of the house at gun point and go before them into each of the farm buildings to make sure there were no more IRA men about. Generally they were courteous enough ...*"<sup>41</sup>

Gerard Wardell discovered the plan for the distribution and laying of the mines on his father's desk as the soldiers from the train, and reinforcements from Lucan, converged on the area, but by then the ambushers had extricated themselves without losses or casualties other than one injured in escaping. The British did conduct some searches.

Barry recounts how the IRA forces revisited the area some days later to collect arms dumped in the retreat. "... *When we reached Wardells, the task of finding the rifles did not seem as easy as I had anticipated. The British had burned all the cocks of hay and the hedges in the vicinity of the house, probably thinking that we or arms were concealed therein. Despite this however, we were able to retrace our steps and we found our rifles and ammunition just as we left them ...*"<sup>42</sup>

It is also possible the fires were started by gunfire.

## British Account

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The only British account extant was a communiqué which formed the basis for press reports, identifying the troops as members of the South Lancashire Regiment.

"... *While a large number of passengers were awaiting the evening train at Kildare on Saturday evening there was noticed an exceptional amount of military activity and that the precincts of the station were closely guarded by troops which had been brought in haste from the Artillery Barracks. The rumour grew that a troop train had been attacked near Hazelhatch station and that some men had been found engaged in working a landmine. After close on an hours delay the troop train steamed in, but before arrival the passengers were ordered to the waiting rooms or off the platform. During the time aeroplanes were circling around the incoming train as well as occasionally flying low over the station and line generally. When the train steamed in slowly it was found that there were on board the South Lancs. regiment which are to be stationed at the Curragh ...*"<sup>43</sup>

The *Irish Times* carried the most comprehensive account based on information supplied by the British army. Using headings such as "Soldiers in Peril", "Attempt to Blow up Train," "Timely arrival of Patrol,"

*“Big Capture of Explosives.”* It relates, “... At about 8pm on the 2nd. July a military patrol of the South Lancashire Regiment surprised a number of rebels in the act of laying land mines on the Great Southern and Western Railway about one mile from Celbridge, evidently with the intention of blowing up a military troop train that was due to pass. A fight ensued, resulting in the dispersal of the rebels of whom six are believed to have been wounded. There were no military casualties ...”<sup>44</sup>

In fact, no side suffered casualties, other than one of the ambushers who broke a leg while clambering over ditches and hedges and was later brought to safety. The *Irish Times* also reported, “*The following material was captured by the troops. Six land mines in position on the railway, gun cotton and gelignite, 100 yards of cable, 1 box of detonators, 1 electrical exploder, 1 Ford car, 5 bicycles, 1 rifle, 2 shotguns, about 300 rounds of 303 ammunition, 32 rounds revolver ammunition, 1 mail bag full of letters ...*”<sup>45</sup>

The *Witness Statements* indicated that more than six land mines were laid. Robert Henry Wardell’s account claims that in the course of railway works some twenty years later the remains of some more of the mines were recovered. The mailbag belonged to the postman.

## **Compensation and Litigation**

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Commandeered vehicles and bicycles were to be used by the ambushers for a fast withdrawal after the attack. According to Robert Henry Wardell all the farm vehicles including a lorry and an Armstrong Siddley car were lined up for such an eventuality.

Barry relates, “... During the night numerous cars and trucks of different types – I should say about twelve all told or more – which had been commandeered by the IRA, had been driven in and parked facing towards the main road along the avenue between the inner and centre gates. I understand these vehicles were to get us away after the fight ...”<sup>46</sup>

Not everything was returned eventually to their rightful owners. The postman, R. W. Magann, sought compensation for loss of property from the Provisional Government in March 1922. In a letter he describes how as a postman for Stacumney district on the 2 July 1921 he was delivering letters to a Mr. Wardell, Stacumney Cottage. As he rode inside the front gate he was confronted by an armed man. His bike, postbag and letters were taken and he was imprisoned from 11 o’clock to 2.30, “... when I

*was released and told to fly for it or I might be shot. I then found myself in the vicinity of what I took to be an ambush on seeing military (British) and armed civilians ...”*

His bicycle was eventually taken away by the British along with others in a lorry. He had enquired of the local IRA after the Truce and was directed to the (Dublin) Castle Yard, “... where a large supply of abandoned bicycles were to be found but not his ...”

Magann claimed the bicycle was his own personal property and that, “... about a month ago before the bicycle was taken I had it newly enamelled and nickled and overhauled generally i.e. new covers, tubes and saddle...”<sup>47</sup>

John Newton Wardell sought compensation for damages to his property arising out of the engagement later that same year. The *Leinster Leader* carried the report on the hearing of the case in Naas Courthouse which contained some surreal argument as to whether the damage was caused by Republican or British bullets.

*“... Mr. J. N. Wardell Celbridge sought compensation for alleged malicious injury to his property by shooting under somewhat peculiar circumstances ... His Honour said there was a case of this kind for a decision of the Court of Appeal. Mr White (for Wardell), but in this case the bullets that caused the damage may have come from the Republican Forces and in any case it was as a result of the actions of Republicans. His Honour: that is the point. It may have been from the Republican Forces and it may not ... The case was adjourned pending the result of the appeal referred to ...”*<sup>48</sup>

## Aftermath

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The immediate aftermath of the ambush sees Patrick Mullaney seize the initiative by the collection of arms dumped, planning and execution of attacks on British forces and the rescue of an injured IRA man hiding out in Stacumney.

Soon after the retreat, word reached Leixlip that a man was lying injured in a ditch near Stacumney. A horse and car was provided, driven by two women to lessen suspicion. The man was located and brought to a nearby house. A doctor had been summoned from Lucan who attended to the man who was safely seen out of the locality. The two women are named as a Miss Dillon and a Miss Devany, while the men involved in the rescue are named as Mullaney, Diarmuid O’Neill, E. Malone and J.



Matt Goff, GAA footballer and later All-Ireland medallist, was active at Stacumney with the Leixlip section.

*Courtesy: Vincent Sutton, Liffey Champion*



Doreen Wardell at Stacumney Cottage, 1920s.

*Courtesy: Olive Wardell*



Edward 'Ned' Malone, of Mill Lane, Leixlip, who was engaged in mine laying at Stacumney, rescue work, retrieving arms and the attack on Lucan RIC Barracks.

*Courtesy: Kevin Malone*



Vol. Midge Byrne, of Meath, engaged the British troops at Wardell's yard.

*Courtesy: Olive Wardell*

Farrell. Mullaney gives the date of the rescue as 3 July 1921, probably early that morning as there would be plenty of summer daylight.

On the same day following the rescue, Mullaney organised the collection of a number of rifles dumped after the retreat acting on information *“from a man living in the locality”*. With Mullaney were J. Farrell, Ed. Malone and Jas. Farrell.

Again, on the same day 3 July, Mullaney began to plan the disruption of increased military patrols passing between Lucan and Celbridge following the ambush. He organised an ambush party and located a suitable site. After several hours with no military targets presenting Mullaney decided to push on to Lucan and attack the RIC Barracks there.

*“... The men were armed with some rifles that had been recovered at Stacumney and a Thompson gun. Fire was opened from the corner of a lane and from a gateway about 40 to 50 yards from the Barracks. Fire was kept up for about 75 minutes. There was a return of fire and after a Very Light went up the party withdrew ...”*

The purpose of the Very light (a type of flare), was to summon patrols nearby to come to the aid of the Barracks, disrupting search parties for stragglers making their way back to Dunboyne.

*“... It was afterwards learned that all the windows had been damaged and that one shot had entered through a loophole in a steel shutter ...”*

The ambush party are named by Mullaney as P. Mullaney, Jas. Farrell, Tom. Farrell, Ed. Malone, P. Campbell, J. Gaynor, P. Kyne and R. Crone.

On 5 July, Mullaney organised a further collection of arms. *“... Twenty hand grenades left in a wood at Nugents and the Thompson gun left near bridge were found by an employee of Wardells. When informed of same, party proceeded to Stacumney and collected same. All were securely dumped ...”*

This accounts for the second of the Thompson guns allocated to the ambush. Clearly the searches by the British military were not particularly thorough, possibly an anticipatory reaction to the Truce just a few days away. The grenades and particularly the Thompson gun were an important recovery.

The same day *“... orders were received for all active men in the area to stay away from their homes until after the Truce took effect ...”* in other words go on the run. Those named by Mullaney as being on the run until the Truce took effect were himself obviously, and Jas. Farrell, J. Gaynor, E. Malone, J. Farrell, R. Crone, J. Buggle, Thos. Farrell.<sup>49</sup>

## Latent Resentments

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The Stacumney Ambush faded from memory in the aftermath of the Truce and subsequent Treaty, Civil War and a new Government. Yet, the events at Stacumney are worthy of analysis. Had the ambush succeeded it would have impacted on the anticipated British-Irish negotiations, raising the morale and strengthening the position of the Irish side.

The role of Collins, the allocation of the scarce and newly arrived Thompson sub-machine guns all indicates how important a successful outcome was to the Republican side.

Conversely, the British precautions in the form of aerial escort, the motorised patrols by road paralleling the train route, all point to the disparity in resources and planning expertise between the opposing forces. The British counter measures at Stacumney were illustrative of a developing British response around the country placing the IRA under mounting pressure. Instead of providing a military victory to strengthen the hand of republican negotiators, it may have reinforced a growing awareness that the IRA had reached the limit of its effectiveness. It could plan large scale operations, but it could not match large scale and technologically superior British responses.

The aftermath of the failed ambush may have contributed to growing tensions between the Divisional Staff, particularly Seán Boylan and the North Kildare IRA. Some time prior to the ambush there had been a reorganisation of the 1st Eastern Division which saw promotions for a select group from which the North Kildare IRA were excluded. This was particularly resented by those in North Kildare who considered Patrick Mullaney of Leixlip an effective leader. This reorganisation had brought North Kildare under the control of Seán Boylan relatively late and to be fair to him some seem never to have accepted him fully.

Seamus Finn in his accounts published years later in the *Meath Chronicle*, refers to this reorganisation and that “... *The appointing of Brigade Staffs did not meet with unanimous approval among us as some of our best officers were passed over and men who were not so well qualified were placed in charge ...*”<sup>50</sup>

Some of the participants felt that their safety was not a priority in being positioned too close to the land mines and there was forthright criticism of the planning of the operation. This raised the issue of the suitability of the location and why it was selected.<sup>51</sup>

Mullaney displayed skill and initiative in extricating his men and

others from the situation. He displayed further initiative in mounting a diversionary attack on Lucan in order to distract search parties and assist stragglers make their way back to Dunboyne.<sup>52</sup>

Mullaney's leadership of his men south of the railway line and their efforts assisted the IRA force escape from destruction or serious depletion of men and arms by capture. The outflanking of the first patrols to arrive and the covering fire to IRA units caught by surprise was crucial. He, and they, proved to be effective and courageous, able to adapt to the changing situation as the military balance turned against them.<sup>53</sup>

The 1st Eastern Division remained intact as a result. It had committed its effective strength at Stacumney and due to courageous effort, it retained that effective strength undiminished at the end of the day. Battles may not be won by retreats, but the conservation of men and resources left them still a cohesive and potential military resource for the future should the Truce break down.

It may have irked the North Kildare IRA that those who were promoted to divisional staff over them were unable to plan and organise the ambush in the detailed and disciplined manner such a complex operation demanded. It would be hard to accept, given his reputation, that Mullaney would have countenanced the lax discipline and lack of awareness evidenced in different Witness Statements.

Who was responsible for selecting the ambush location became clouded. Boylan in his *Witness Statement* claimed the spot was picked by Michael Collins conferring his prestige on the decision. Mullaney in the *O'Malley Notebooks*, laid responsibility on Boylan's divisional staff.

On the eve of the Truce an attack was planned on Maynooth Barracks. Leixlip and "... units from other areas were to take part. Units from Leixlip carried out instructions and after waiting about two hours were withdrawn. It was learned that other units had not taken up position ..."

This is confirmed by James Maguire, Brigade Commander, Mullingar Brigade, "... Just before the Truce I got instructions from Divisional Commander Seán Boylan that every barracks in the area was to be attacked on the day of the Truce..."<sup>54</sup>

Not turning up may have indicated a view that the attack was pointless, but Mullaney was probably not impressed. It would have been the responsibility of divisional staff to ensure a planned attack was carried out.

A series of resentments were building up in the North Kildare IRA that were compounded with other differences with Seán Boylan and his staff later during the Truce period up to July 1922. It is not without

significance that when the 1st Eastern Division of the IRA under Seán Boylan supported the Treaty, the only Divisional Area that dissented and took up arms against the Treaty was the North Kildare IRA under the leadership of Patrick Mullaney.

## Finale

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In July 1921, following the Truce Training Camps were set up in Celbridge and Leixlip. Divisional Training Camps were set up in Woodpark and Ballymacoll in Meath. “... *the Workhouse at Celbridge was taken over and a permanent camp established. Three AS Units were formed and trained for further participation in fight if Truce was ended ...*”<sup>55</sup>

It was not to be. Within a year some of those participating had turned their guns on one another in the tragedy of Civil War.

# Present at Stacumney, July 1921

MA/MSPC/A/57(1) p.21

*List of names of men from North Kildare  
who took an active part in Stacumney Ambush 2nd July 1921.*

## **Leixlip**

P. E. Mullaney  
Thos. Farrell, Vice Batt. Comdt.  
Jas. Farrell, Vice Adj.  
John Buggle, Engineer  
Jas. Farrell, Coy. O.C.  
Robert Crone, Q.M.  
Patrick Lalor  
Edward Malone  
Maurice Ardiffe  
John Gaynor  
M. O'Neill  
Peter Kyne  
John Farrell  
Matt. Goff  
Jas. Malone  
James Dempsey  
Patk. Campbell  
Vincent Ardiffe  
Jas. Savage  
Jeremiah O'Neill  
P. Nolan

## **Celbridge**

Batt. Comdt. Alex. Dwyer  
John O'Connor  
Patk. Healy  
Patk. Atkins  
Michael Connolly  
Patrick Callaghan  
Patrick Gallagher  
Thomas Harvey  
Jas. Brady  
Pat. Kelly  
Thos. Caldwell  
Jas. Dempsey  
P. Fagan  
L. Roe  
W. McGann  
Patk. Donovan  
Joe Kelly  
Thos. Kealy  
Frank Kelly  
Jas. Meade

## **Straffan**

John Logie  
John Travers  
Ed. Donovan  
Ed. Kavanagh  
James Maher  
Thos. McKenna

## **Mainham**

Patrick Dunne – Mainham  
Edward O'Neill – Rathcoffey  
Jas. Delaney – Mainham  
Patrick Short – Mainham

## **Prosperous**

Michael Fields – Blackwood  
John Dempsey – Prosperous  
John Booth – Prosperous  
M. Coffey – Prosperous  
J. Tracy – Prosperous

## **Eye-witness account of Robert Henry Wardell who was ten years of age when the events at Stacumney took place.**

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The account was dictated to his son Robert Wardell who presented it to the author on 13 November 1993.

*"During the night of 1 July 1921, a number of armed men arrived at Stacumney Cottage and herded all the family into one upstairs room. There was John Newton Wardell (owner) Chattie (his sister) Harry (10 years), George and Gerry (his three sons) and Doreen (his daughter).*

*The rest of the house was teeming with IRA men dressed in civilian clothes but armed with rifles and pistols. They were courteous to the occupants and sent up food to the bedroom.*

*During the morning as the various farm labourers arrived for work they were locked up in the farm buildings as was the postman when he arrived at 11 o'clock.*

*Jack Johnson who was the steward (sic) on the other Wardell farm down the lane at Bellbrook sent up a man to collect a harrow & this man was promptly locked up.*

*Jack Johnson then sent up Kate Nugent to see what had happened to the 1st man & she was locked up.*

*Jack Johnson decided to come up himself with two shire cart horses to see what was going on & was locked up also (with the horses).*

*Boy Wardell then came up and was locked up.*

*Gerry Wardell apparently tried to look out through the bedroom window & was shouted at by the guard outside who told him he would blow his head off if he did not get back.*

*All the farm motorized vehicles including a lorry & and an armstrong sidley car were lined up ready for a rapid get away after the ambush.*

*About 2.30 in the afternoon 2 crossley tenders came up the lane with regular soldiers on board on their way to check Stacumney bridge prior to the troop trains coming through. When they came level with the farm gate lodge an IRA man keeping a look out got excited & threw a grenade at the soldiers who returned fire.*

*The British officer in charge managed to turn one of the tenders & return to Lucan for reinforcements.*

*After about half an hour the shooting died down & the Wardells began to realise that everything was quiet in the house as the IRA had evacuated same.*

*John Newton started moving around checking the room but was seen through the upstairs bedroom window by a British soldier who fired at him the bullet lodging in the wall near the door.*

*On stripping the wallpaper during redecoration some years ago the hole was still visible as it had not been filled in.*

*The British soldiers then made John Newton come out of the house at gun point & go before them into each of the farm buildings to make sure that there were no more IRA men about. Generally they were courteous enough.*

*Gerry Wardell discovered a plan showing how the charges were to be placed on the railway left on John Newton's desk.*

*Soldiers from the train which had been stopped down the line joined reinforcements from Lucan. But no IRA men were caught.*

*One IRA man who had a gunshot wound lay all night in a ditch near the garden & was collected next day by a man with a donkey.*

*Twenty years later some of the charges were found still intact by the railway.”*



James Meade, of Celbridge, guarded and readied the vehicles for escape afterwards.  
*Courtesy: Seamus O Midheach*

## Some Notes on the Statement of Robert Henry Wardell

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While Robert Henry Wardell was ten years old at the time and could not have witnessed some of the events described one should never underestimate the capacity of a child to overhear adults as they discuss the events in the immediate aftermath.

Robert Wardell the son of Robert Henry Wardell and grandson of John Newton Wardell elaborated on the statement given by his father on 13 November 1993.

The greatest fear of John Newton Wardell during the occupation of his residence was that if the attack succeeded the family would become a target for reprisals and that the farmhouse, outhouses and equipment would be burned and the family ruined as a result.

The study of John Newton Wardell was the command post of the IRA. It was Gerard Wardell, who first discovered on his father's desk items which were later understood to be the firing mechanism for the mines as well as a hand drawn map of the proposed ambush.

These items were confiscated by the British military.

Further elaboration was given to the author by Olive Wardell, sister to Robert Wardell and granddaughter of John Newton Wardell to the effect that all the employees detained by the IRA were locked into the farm grinding house. George Wardell, older brother to Robert Henry later drove those employees to Dublin for questioning. George Wardell never spoke about the ambush on the basis that "*a shut mouth attracts neither flies nor bullets.*"

## Endnotes

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1. Coogan, T. P. *De Valera, Long Fella, Long Shadow*. London, 1993, pp 218-229.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Coogan T. P. *Michael Collins, A Biography*. London, 1990, p.216.
4. *Ibid.* pp 216-217
5. *The Freemans Journal* 25 June 1921. The soldiers were named as Sergeant Charles Dawson, Private William Henry Telford and Private Carl Horace Harpur. The train guard was named as Mr. Francis Gallagher.
6. Trains were ambushed throughout 1919-1921. Cf. *Bureau of Military History Witness Statement* 0596 George Nolan, p.12, attack on train in Ballyfermot “a few days before the Truce on the 11 July 1921.” (Henceforth *BMH WS*) *BMH WS* 0434, attempted attack on train at Drumcondra, 16 July 1921, using a Thompson sub-machine gun, also *BMH WS* 0608, *WS* 434, *WS* 882. A private William Saunders, Queens Own Royal West Kent Regt. was killed in that attack.
7. *Military Archives, Military Service Pension Collection, MA/MSPC/A/57(1), henceforth MA/MSPC/A/57(1). MSP34 Ref 35313*, wherein Mullaney confirms joining the Irish Volunteers in November 1917. *O'Malley Notebooks*, p.26. Also, author's interview with Mrs Margaret Mullaney the widow of Patrick Mullaney, 7 August 1994. He was recruited into the Irish Volunteers after the release of the 1916 prisoners. Mullaney took the anti-Treaty side and led an efficient column for some months in the Civil War. The Leixlip area where Mullaney lived and worked 1913-1921, was the only area of the 1st Eastern Division to take the anti-Treaty side reflecting a possible poor relationship with the leadership of the division, particularly General Seán Boylan. The evidence of the *O'Malley Notebooks* supports this view. Like many, Mullaney did not participate in the Witness Statements, reserving his comments for the *Notebooks*. It is possible that the aftermath of the events at Stacumney was a contributory factor. Following the Civil War Patrick Mullaney settled in his native Mayo as a national teacher in Balla. He died in 1974 and is buried there.
8. Seamus Finn of Athboy Co. Meath, left comprehensive witness statements. He was Adjutant of the then Meath Brigade, Irish Republican Army as it was becoming known, 1916-1917. Following subsequent reorganisation, he was Vice OC and Director of Training, 1st Eastern Division. He also left an account in a series of articles in the *Meath Chronicle*, April/May 1972. There is also a brief account in Coogan, Oliver. *Politics and War in Meath 1913-1923*. Dublin, 1983.
9. The Home of the Wardell Family, Stacumney Cottage, was at the centre of events. The head of the household was Mr. John Newton Wardell. His son Mr. Robert Henry Wardell was ten-years-of-age at the time. The Wardells were members of the Society of Friends, commonly known as Quakers. This has some relevance in evaluating the witness statements.
10. General Seán Boylan, Edenmore, Dunboyne, Co. Meath. Officer Commanding Meath Brigade, and subsequently, Officer Commanding 1st Eastern Division. The IRA had recently been reorganised into divisional areas. The 1st Eastern Division and its appointed staff officers was responsible for operations in the North Kildare area. There was some resentment at the allocation of promotions. These criticisms are to be found in the *O'Malley Notebooks* and may be coloured by post-Civil War rancour. Boylan's *BMH WS* is 1715.
11. Boylan, *BMH WS* 1715. *MSP34 Ref 35313* p.38 Eamonn Cullen, Engineer to the 1st Eastern Division, confirms attendance at the meeting. He lists the GHQ Staff attending as Michael Collins, Dick Mulcahy, Rory O' Connor, D. O'Hegarty and Ginger O'Connell. Cullen is adamant that GHQ picked the location overruling his advice as Engineer. “.. we were allowed no choice in the selection of this point.”

12. *O'Malley Notebooks* p.3, p.30. In the light of subsequent criticisms, the allocation of responsibility for picking the location could be significant. Mullaney was IRB Centre for Kildare and on the Leinster Council of the IRB (p.31), Boylan was IRB Head Centre for Meath (p.45).
13. Boylan, *BMH* WS 1715 p.37. Tonite (pronounced toe-nite) is an explosive now out of use, composed of equal parts barium nitrate and gun cotton. Gelignite is still used as an explosive in mines and quarries.
14. Finn, *BMH* WS 1060 p.52.
15. *Ibid* p.53. Finn clearly had a high regard for Mullaney, "...I made tracks for Kildare, and my first stop was at Leixlip. There I met the Battalion Comdt. Pat Mullaney, and his fellow officers. A battalion parade was held and we got through some good work. I liked these men, they were quiet lads but I got the idea they were sound..."
16. *MSPC/A/57(1)*. Recollection of Henry Wardell, 13/11/1993. I am indebted to Ms. Olive Wardell for her help and assistance in writing this account.  

The 1911 *Census Return* lists the occupants as John Newton Wardell aged 48 as Head of Family, Mary Florence aged 37, his wife, George Newton aged 7, Gerald William aged 1 and Doreen Mary Barrett aged 4 months. By 1921, Robert Henry Wardell had been born and Mary Florence was deceased. Their Religion is listed as Society of Friends.

Richard A. Nugent died in 1916, leaving a small donation for the poor of Celbridge and an injunction to his children to never marry outside the Catholic faith.

The 1911 *Census Return* lists the occupants of Stacumney House as Richard A. Nugent, his wife Theresa Henrietta, two daughters Mary Theresa and Rose, one of whom must be the "Miss Nugent" referred to by Mullaney. There was also a son, Richard.
17. Finn, *BMH* WS 1060 p.53.
18. *MA/MSPC/A/57(1)*. Verbal account to the author by Mr. Edward (Ned) Malone, late of Mill Lane Leixlip, who was present that night engaged in mine laying. Mr Malone was active 1919-21. Mr. Malone was clear in his accounts of the tensions and anxiety inherent in this work.
19. Boylan, *BMH* WS 1715 p.38. *MSP34 Ref 35313* p.28, has an account by Mullaney but his account in *MA/MSPC/A/57(1)* is more detailed and preferred here.
20. Finn *BHM* WS 1060 pp 54, 55. Mullaney, in the *O'Malley Notebooks*, p.30, also mentions that two trains were involved. As well as the section covering the engineers the North Kildare group were involved in laying the mines, obstructing roads, scouting and other duties such as that of James Meade of Celbridge guarding and readying the vehicles for escape afterwards. The North Kildare group was the most numerous individual group.
21. Commandant Matthew Barry, Kilsallaghan, Co. Meath, O.C. "B" 2nd Battalion Meath Brigade, 1918-21, Vice-Comdt. 2nd Battalion, 2nd Meath Brigade, 1919-1922. *BMH* WS 932 p.4. Some of the pick and shovel men were from Leixlip. "I had my whole Bn there, men were cutting trees and blocking roads." Mullaney, *O'Malley Notebooks* p.31.
22. James Cunnigan, Adjutant Fingal Brigade, 1st Eastern Division, IRA. *BMH* WS 1395. He mentions that some of the other men at Stacumney were armed with RIC or cavalry carbines. He also confirms the bringing in of prisoners.
23. *MA/MSPC/A/57(1)*; Finn *BMH* WS 1060 p.54.
24. *MA/MSPC/A/57(1)* and *BHM* WS 1060, also *Meath Chronicle* 15 April 1972, and 29 April 1972, wherein Finn gives an account of the ambush.
25. *Ibid* p.54 ff. The attack on Lucan Barracks and the use of the Thompson gun is confirmed by Mr. E. Malone, who took part in the attack, in a verbal account to the author. The reference to the ambusher who broke his leg is in Coogan, Oliver *Politics and War in Meath 1913-1923* Dublin 1983, pp 170-176.

- Mullaney in the *O'Malley Notebooks* states, "... A Thompson gunman from Dublin (was) there. I managed to convince Magennis that he should leave the Thompson ..." p.31.
26. Barry, *BMH* WS 932.
  27. *Ibid.*
  28. *Ibid.* As regards the use of the Thompson which allowed the escape, Finn says of McGuinness, "He was so cool and quick to grasp the situation and to act." Finn, *BMH* WS 1060 p.57.
  29. *Ibid.*
  30. He mentions that the house to which they called contained "pictures of the King and Queen and so forth hanging on the walls" p.8. They may well have been family portraits. Cunnigan relates how his group, crossed the canal before circling around back to Celbridge, crossing the Liffey before reaching Ravensdale where they commandeered food and drink. From thence they made their way to Dunboyne. Cunnigan, *BMH* WS 1395 p.23.
  31. Finn, *BHM* WS 1060 pp 5,7, Barry, *BHM* WS 932, Cunnigan *BHM* WS 1395.
  32. John Gaynor, Captain, Balbriggan Company, Irish Volunteers and IRA. *BMH* WS1447, Barry *BMH* WS 932.
  33. Barry, *BMH* WS 932.
  34. McCarthy, Patrick J. 'The RAF and Ireland,' in *The Irish Sword. The Journal of Military History Society of Ireland*. Vol. xvii, No. 68, p181 ff.  
Two aircraft provided cover for the procession of George V at the opening of the Northern Ireland parliament.
  35. Joyce, Labhras. 'Weapons of the War of Independence,' in *The Irish Sword. The Journal of The Military History Society of Ireland*. Vol. xxvii, No. 109.  
Stapleton, *BMH* WS 822, Dalton, *BMH* WS 434.
  36. Gaynor, *BMH* WS 1447. He also refers to the playing of the Wardell piano and singing.
  37. Cunnigan, *BMH* WS 1395.
  38. Barry, *BMH* WS 932.
  39. Gaynor, *BMH* WS 1447 p.30.
  40. Recollections of Henry Wardell, 13 November 1993. I am also indebted to Ms. Olive Wardell for her assistance on the Wardell family, including the working relationships between the families in Bellbrook and Stacumney Cottage.  
Barry confirms, "...Later on we saw others being brought in, such as a postman in uniform and apparently workmen and being made prisoners..." *BMH* WS 932, pp 3-4. Also Gaynor, "...A number of men, who looked like workmen, and a postman were brought in under escort and locked up as prisoners under guard..."  
Gaynor, *BMH* WS 1447 p.30. When opportunity arises to cross check Henry Wardell's account it matches with other accounts.  
Mullaney, *MA/MSPC/A/57(1)*, claims that the shire horses were injured in crossfire, one being killed. The Wardell's make no mention of this.
  41. *Ibid.*
  42. Barry. *BMH*. WS 932, p.10
  43. *Leinster Leader*. 9 July 1921 "Attempt on Troop Train near Celbridge."
  44. *Irish Times* 4 July 1921.
  45. *Irish Times*, 4 July 1921; *Leinster Leader*, 9 July 1921. The artillery barracks referred to in the *Leinster Leader* report was on the Dublin Road and was the nearest to the train station. It has long been sold for development.
  46. Barry, *BMH* WS 932 p.4.
  47. *National Archives of Ireland*. Department of Justice Files, H Files, H12.

48. *Leinster Leader*, 5 November 1921. Compensation was paid to all parties eventually.
49. *MA/MSPC/A/57(1)*. Edward Malone, who had been engaged in mine laying earlier, was clear in his account to the author about the use of the Thompson gun. He was also clear that the purpose of the attack was to distract and disrupt military patrols looking for the IRA as they retreated to Dunboyne. *MSP34 Ref 35313* p.29 and p.47 for a brief account by Michael Lynch, RIC, who was in Lucan Barracks during the attack.
50. Finn, *Meath Chronicle*, 15 April, 29 April 1972. *MSP34 Ref 35313* p.22, Mullaney claims he was eventually promoted to Divisional Intelligence Officer late in July 1922. "*The other crowd had appointed me Divisional Intelligence Officer which I did not accept of course.*"
51. Barry, *BMH WS 932* p.11, already quoted. Also Cunnigan *BMH WS 1395* p.22 for similar comment. *MSP34 Ref 35313* p.44ff, Eamon Cullen, Engineer, 1st Eastern Division, gave a lengthy analysis from an engineering point of view as to defective explosive, defective detonators, only one functioning imploder and slowness in mine laying due to work being halted to hide from passing trains. Prior to the ambush he had pointed out to GHQ the unsuitability of the ambush location (p.39).
52. Finn, *BMH WS 1060*.
53. Mullaney seems to have seized the initiative in securing the withdrawal and securing the IRA force and weapons. Boylan, the Commanding Officer of the 1st Eastern Division was clear in his Witness Statement that he was absent on the advice of Michael Collins. Whether that was an oblique response to contemporary criticism is a matter of judgement. Boylan, *BHM WS 1715* p.37.
54. *MA/MSPC/A/57(1)*.
55. *Ibid.*



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