

## BALLANCE HOUSE PLOUGHS ON TO THE PAST

WEE Fergies and old Fords are known well by rural folk, but can they tell a pulper from a horse walk? Do they know farming machinery used before Harry Ferguson arrived with modern tractors?

The Ballance House at Lisburn Road, Glenavy has a fascinating display of farm machinery used when horses provided the power to turn the soil, save the hay or thresh that stackyard of corn.

Open to groups year round this Ulster New Zealand Trust collection in a Co Antrim Victorian farmyard has proved extra popular since being revamped during the Covid close down. The adjacent indoor museum revealing how farming folk from this small province played a major role in developing New Zealand. A land where settlers and Maori, male and female, were treated equally by John Ballance, New Zealand Prime Minister in the 1890s.

Touring the farmyard and house where he grew up gives an amazing insight into this remarkable son of an Ulster tenant farmer. A typical example of farm machinery Ballance would have known as a lad is the Unchokable Pulper by Pierce of Wexford. Equipment used in nearly every farmyard on this island for over a century.

Founded by James Pierce in 1839 to develop hearth fans or bellows for lighting fires Pierce of Wexford was particularly successful in the late 1800s and remained in business until 2002 The enterprise was further developed by brothers Phillip, d 1895, Martin, d.1907, and John, d. 1926. At one time they were the largest engineering & agricultural machinery manufacturer in Munster.

Based at Mill Road, Wexford Town Philip Pierce & Co Ltd, iron founders, agricultural implement and tool manufacturers by 1914 had over 1,000 employees.

The pulper at Ballance House was gifted by former Lisburn agents for Pierce of Wexford Redmond Jefferson Ltd, a much respected firm in Bow Street that become part of the J P Corry Group.

Pulpers like this were turned by hand to pulp uproot crops such as turnips, beet, cabbage and potatoes before they were fed to animals. Offering stock a whole potato, for example, risked choking a valuable animal.

For those pushing tubers into the machine with one hand and turning the handle with the other that phrase 'mind your fingers' comes to mind!



For sadly and frequently many working these pulpers lost tops of fingers! Operating the Pierce Pulper and dreaming of that wee girl down the lane with a few fields of her own was doubly dangerous!

Pierce of Wexford sold equipment across the British Empire and beyond with large displays at national events such as the Royal Smithfield Show in London and had sales offices in London, Paris and Buenos Aires.

Pierce seems to have lost a lot of business during World War I and, while it was important on the Irish Republic's home market up until the 1950s, it did not fully embrace the opportunities that the tractor offered. Exports also faltered as any firm based in an independent Republic of Ireland was now, to some extent, cut off from markets across the UK and former colonies. Irish membership of the European common market in 1973 coming too late to reinvigorate this once famous firm.

Aside from the pulper The Ballance House also has two pairs of the Pierce hearth bellows once found beside every fireplace in the country, and many more pieces of 19<sup>th</sup> century farm machinery.

