

## Birr Was Stopping Spot In Busy Settlement Era

By A. S. Garrett

**B**IRR VILLAGE, grouped about the intersection of highway No. 4 and concession 13, London Township, is probably as well-known to the general public as any other small place in Western Ontario owing to the heavy traffic, tourist and otherwise, flowing Londonwards from Elginfield the latter located in the vicinity of three provincial highways, two of them already paved and the third expected to be in the not distant future.

In common with many another Western Ontario hamlet, the beginnings of Birr are shrouded largely in hearsay and it is with no little difficulty that glimpses of past happenings can be obtained, owing to the dearth of accurate records and the inaccuracies of local tradition.

However, that Birr was an important stopping place on the old London-Goderich road can scarcely be denied and probably its origin as a village was largely due to the necessity of accommodation for both man and beast engaged in transporting the huge quantities of merchandise and produce that once moved over this important thoroughfare.

Local legend has it that, at an early date, Patrick Smith kept some sort of hostelry on the Proof Line road, in the vicinity of present-day Birr or immediately northwards. On one occasion, while hauling home provisions from Port Stanley, Smith met John Ferguson, a native of County Cavan, Ireland, who had emigrated to Canada in the 1820's but at the time was living near St. Thomas.

Smith is claimed to have persuaded Ferguson to locate in the Birr area and the latter finally settled on concession 13, about a mile west of the main road. There he built a shanty and his son, Benjamin Ferguson, one-time school teacher in Lambeth, was born on this farm.

Neighbors in the vicinity included O'Neils, Waldens, Shoebottoms, Langfords and Smiths.

During the long winter evenings, the settlers gathered in Smith's hostelry and discussed recollections of Ireland. It is said that an old arm chair, once used in Smith's sitting room, is still preserved in the basement of a London home.

The theory that Birr was named after the Irish village of similar cognomen seems well authenticated. The Irish Birr is now known by its more modern name of Parsonstown and is said to be comparable to Middlesex County's Lambeth in extent.

Mrs. James Scott, who was born in County Tipperary, three miles from the Irish Birr, came to Canada as a child and lived most of her long life on a farm on concession 15, three miles distant from the London Township Birr.

Birr residents of the present time claim that the place was once jocularly referred to as "Bobtown" owing to the many men in the vicinity who had the Christian name of Robert.

The two Birr cemeteries are the final resting places of many of the district's early residents. Henry Bilyca, died in 1852, is claimed to have been the first person interred in the Anglican Cemetery.

George McConnell (1765-1835), whose grave is still marked by an ancient wooden slab, was one of the first to be buried in the Methodist (now United) Cemetery. Thomas Langford, who died from injuries received at the raising of a log barn, was buried there in 1838. In the same cemetery, marked by a high white shaft, is the grave of Francis Walden, died 1872 who is said to have participated in the Rebellion of 1837, serving with the militia engaged in putting down the insurrection.

John Scott, a veteran of the War of 1812-14, who settled on the southwest corner farm at the intersection of concession 15 and the Adelaide Sideroad, of London Township, was laid to rest in this burial ground, in the 1860's, but the grave is unmarked at the present time. Charles Goulding, an old settler, died in 1846, having been then a resident of the township for 36 years.

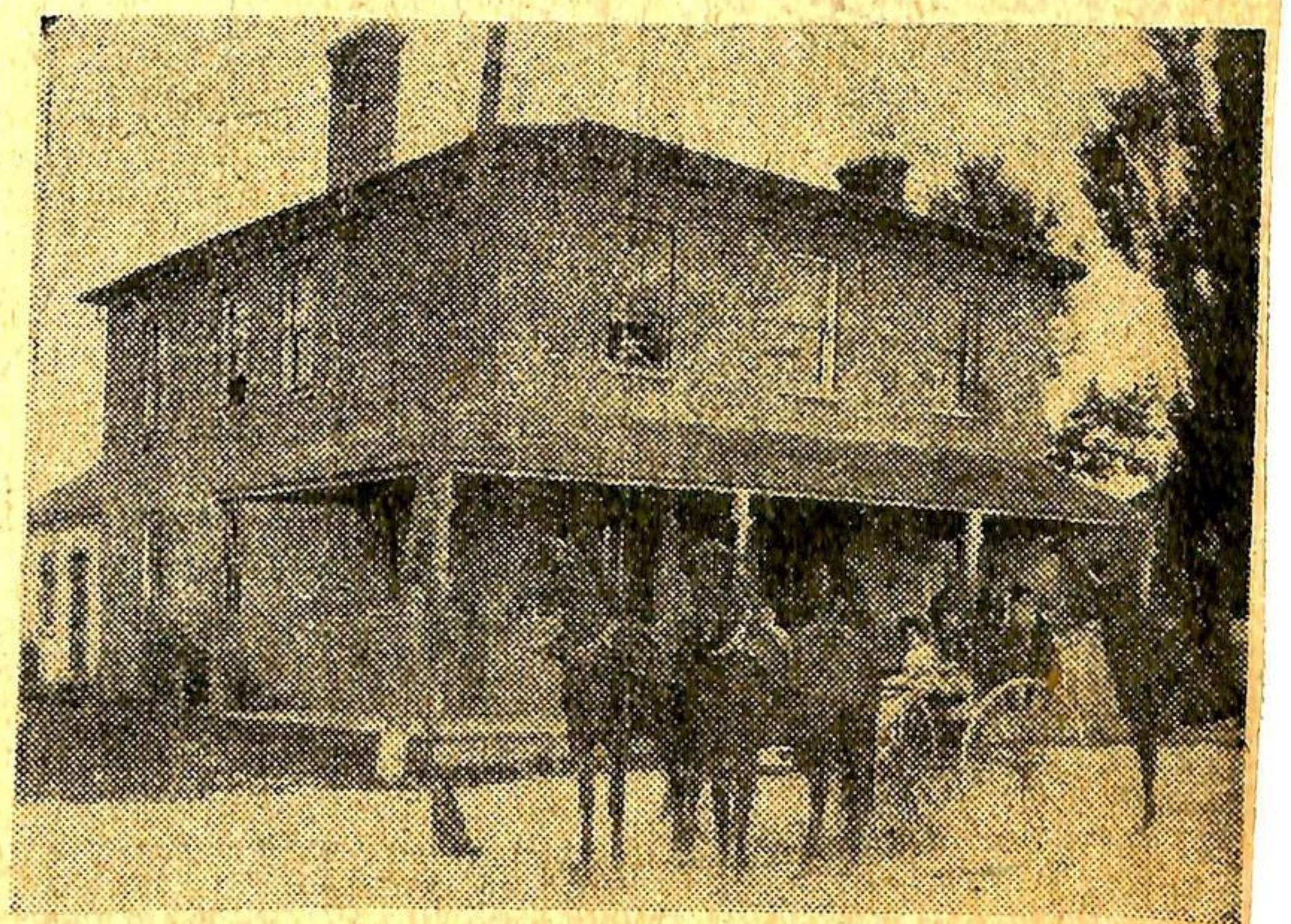
Several years ago, the late John Maxwell pointed out to the writer the fact that a regrettable error had been made when laying out plans for the two cemeteries. The Anglican cemetery was extended southwards instead of eastwards, as it should have been. Had the latter been the case the two burial grounds would have come together, forming one long, continuous cemetery with the Anglican Church crowning the hill in the background, thus presenting an attractive panorama to tourists, etc., when viewed from the highway where it traverses the village.

Birr appears to have had quite a number of business places, associated with it at one time or another. The cheese factory, which is said to have been near the bridge at the west side of the road, was built in 1888 at a cost of \$2,500. J. W. Ferguson, E. K. Sale, J. W. Taylor, R. M. Hobbs, Peter Bowey, Charles Goulding and James Bell comprised the first executive.

At one time a man named Harmer lived in Birr and made shoes by hand, specializing in long leather boots. Jonathan Hodgins is recorded as an early hotel proprietor and others following the same occupation in after years included Raphael O'Neil, Thomas Creighton, Frank J. Scott and Sandy Burr. Some Birr people of the present time recall the Blue Jay Inn, south of the village, once kept by Samuel Berryhill. In 1865, it is recorded there was still a third tavern, kept by the McIntosh family, but little information concerning its location is given.

Leonard Lambourne and John Storey were among the old-time blacksmiths in the community. Joseph Lumsden and John Clough were similarly engaged in later years.

Even a short story concerning the Birr community must contain special reference to Etheld Harris, who took over the general store about 1909 and during the years following added more mercantile and industrial enterprises until he had established one of the most unique business



The picture shows Birr Hotel as it appeared in the gay nineties. In more recent years the building was converted into a community hall and now serves as a storage depot and apartments.

500 burials. Mr. Wilson died in 1904, at the age of 65.

We wish to conclude this story by paying tribute to the late J. R. (Rob) Coleman, who, during his lifetime, planted hundreds of fine trees in the vicinity of the village. Two farms, on either side of the 13th concession, attest to his skill as a nurseryman. Also the rows of evergreens which surround the school yard, United Cemetery, etc., are a living reminder of his enterprise in this line.

These innumerable trees have added inestimably to the appearance and value of property in the community and have attracted the interest of numerous tourists who pass this way every year. Mr. Coleman died in 1924, when only 49 years of age.

set-ups in Canada. Only recently he sold out to Capt. Jack Legg, well-known Londoner and veteran of World War II.

Birr residents recall with pleasure the memory of the late Rev. Robert Wilson, who for 35 years was rector of Trinity Anglican Church, in the village, and also of St. George's Church, further west in the township. Parish records show that during his long incumbency he performed 1,007 baptisms, 645 confirmations, 150 marriages and