

# MELFIELD: FROM OPERA TO ROCKERA



## Introduction

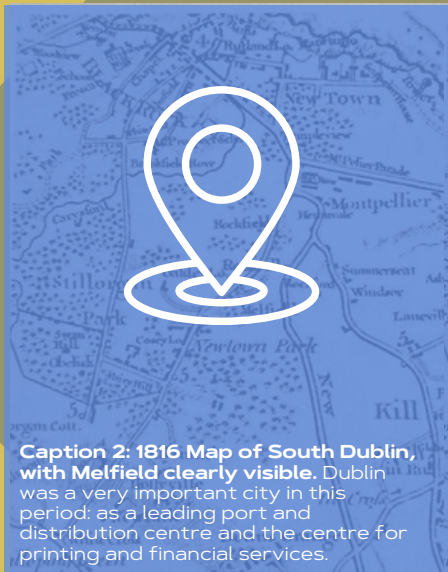
Melfield is one of the oldest buildings in the Blackrock Ward and it has a fascinating history. This building has resounded with music for over 200 years, as the home of an important Irish cultural figure, an innovative school called Avoca, which championed music and drama and for almost 40 years it's been Newpark Academy of Music to a whole generation of aspiring musicians. This is its story.

## From Mel's Field to Melfield

Melfield was built in the 1790s on a site of land simply called Mel's Field in an area called Newtown Castlebyrne. Who Mel was we may never know, but we do now know the area as Blackrock.



**Caption 1: Drone image of Melfield, approx. 2015.** Taken during the rebuilding of Newpark Comprehensive School



**Caption 2: 1816 Map of South Dublin, with Melfield clearly visible.** Dublin was a very important city in this period: as a leading port and distribution centre and the centre for printing and financial services.



Melfield was one of a host of villas built by the middle-class merchants and professionals of the time to suit their lifestyles, including the Bewley and Findlater families. The expansion from Dublin city into the suburbs was because Dublin city had reached a high level of overcrowding in the late 18th century and had a "degree of filth and stench inconceivable of a capital city".

## Artistic Legacy

Melfield has a rich musical and artistic legacy, which began with one Joseph Atkinson, a retired army captain, who decided to make his home away from the bustling and chaotic city life of Dublin, into the peace and quiet of South County Dublin.



Caption 3: Joseph Atkinson by James Heath, engraved image, c 1777-1834, image licensed from the National Library of Ireland.



Caption 4: The gate lodge of Melfield.

The property would have contained a large parcel of land in this period: enough to include a gate lodge, a small-holding farm, a walled garden, an orchard and glass houses.

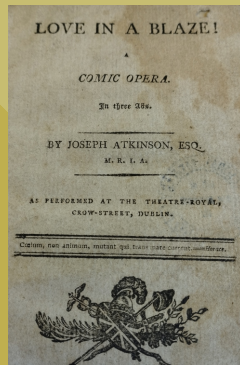
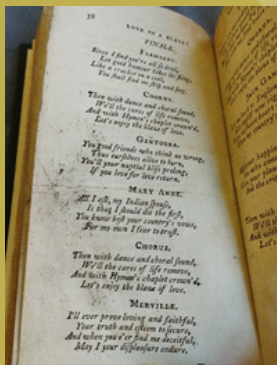
As well as enjoying a military career, Atkinson was also a renowned poet, dramatist and librettist. Dublin was a had a thriving theatre tradition in Atkinsons life time and there were several theatres which were at the centre of artistic life, which would also have included balls, outdoor concerts, often with fireworks and promenading, an important part of social life. His first play, 'The Mutual Deception' was performed in one of the oldest, Smock Alley on 2 March 1785, and after some slight alterations, later performed as 'Tit for Tat', in the Theatre Royal, Haymarket in London.



Atkinson was lyricist for two operas: 'A Match for a Widow' performed in Smock Alley in 1786 and 'Love in a Blaze', which was performed in Crow Street Theatre in 1799. Both works were reliant on English and French original pieces and were composed by the renowned musician Sir John Stevenson.



Caption 5: Smock Alley Theatre 1775 – Atkinson's plays and operas were performed in both Smock Alley and the Crow Street Theatre, as well as the Haymarket in London.



Caption 6: Excerpt and frontispiece from the comic opera 'Love in a Blaze', written by Joseph Atkinson. Images courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

Atkinson also wrote poetry: 'Congratulatory ode to General William Howe, on his return from American' (1778), 'Killarney' (1798), 'Mount Merrion' (1816) and 'A Poetic Excursion' (1818), which is a description of Co Wicklow in verse.

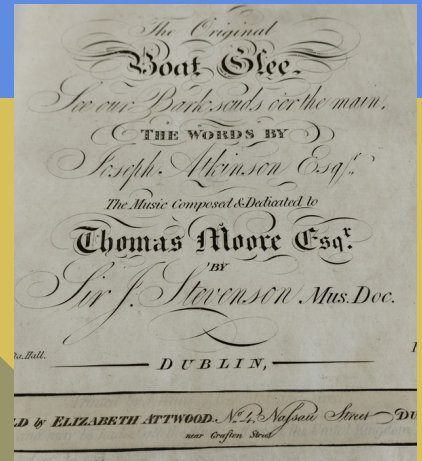
All his poems display a florid, romantic style, popular at the time. Atkinson also wrote numerous prologues for the Crow Street Theatre.



Caption 7: Thomas Moore, poet, patriot and great friend of Joseph Atkinson.

## Collaborations

The rich cultural life that Joseph Atkinson enjoyed brought him into contact with many of the leading artists of the day. He was a great friend of Thomas Moore, who reimagined Irish music and brought it to a new audience. Moore enjoyed friendships with many important artistic figures of the time, including Lord Byron and William Wordsworth. Moore is still popular today, particularly amongst the Irish diaspora, where he is often referred to as the 'Bard of Ireland'.



Caption 8: Song written by Atkinson and Stevenson and dedicated to Thomas Moore. Courtesy of NLI

Atkinson also collaborated with Lady Sydney Morgan, the daughter of Robert Owenson, an actor and manager of the New Music Hall in Fishamble Street.



Caption 9: Portrait of Lady Sydney Owenson Morgan. Morgan was a prolific and successful Irish novelist, who made over £25,000 in her lifetime.

Born Sydney Owenson, Morgan was a prolific writer, of over 22 books, including 'The Wild Irish Girl' and 'O'Donnell'. She also wrote musical scores, one of which she dedicated to Joseph Atkinson, 'Deep in Love' and he wrote a Prologue for Morgan's comic opera 'The Whim of a Moment' in 1807.

Politically Lady Morgan was involved in the movement towards Catholic Emancipation and was a more popular writer than Maria Edgeworth in this period, herself a pioneer of the early novel. It is estimated she made over £25,000 in her lifetime. She also received a Civil List pension of £300 from the ruling Whig Party, the first of its kind given to a woman writer.



Caption 10: Deep in Love, written by Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan) and dedicated to Atkinson. Courtesy NLI.

Joseph Atkinson continued to live in Melfield and was publishing poetry right until his death in Staffordshire in England 1818, whilst visiting family. He is buried there and a simple epitaph by Thomas Moore is laid on his grave. There is also a plaque commemorating him in the Anglican church, Monkstown, Co Dublin. After his death his son Joseph junior continued to live on at Melfield until his death in 1861.

## Melfield after Atkinson

Melfield was sold thereafter to the Crowe family. Michael F Crowe was an architect, builder and Justice of the Peace. He planned to retire to Melfield and, perhaps because of the advent of transport to the Newtownpark area, which was seen as a good place for investment, he immediately set upon designing another house on the Melfield plot. The result was Belfort: a larger property than Melfield, with its own adjacent gate lodge.



Captions 11: Belfort, designed and built by Michael F Crowe

## Melfield Divided

The Crowe's sold Melfield to a family called the O'Reilly's, in 1925. They owned a much larger house, Rockville (situated behind Melfield) and in 1925 divided the building into two houses, with two separate staircases and a flat in the basement. It appears the building fell into disrepair at this stage.

## Avoca School

Avoca School was founded in 1891 by AA McDonagh, and was moved to the Newtownpark Campus in 1936. It became a centre of educational innovation under the 43-year leadership of AA McDonagh up to 1934 and then under Cyril and Cerise (née Orpen) Parker, between 1935 and 1962.



Captions 12: Avoca School moved to Belfort in 1936. It later incorporated Melfield (seen on right of photograph)

The Parkers fostered a holistic model of education, heavily influenced by the Froebel system, in which pupils were seen as active, curious, creative learners. Music, art, PE and woodwork were valued as much as academic subjects. Fees in the school were modest and there were scholarships awarded to promising pupils.

Musical education and art appreciation were permanent fixtures on the curriculum, with a music session being run every Saturday morning and trips to art galleries.



Caption 13: Cyril and Cerise Parker, Headmaster/mistress of the senior and junior school respectively



Caption 14: Avoca School cherished art and musical education

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## Melfield and Belfort become Newpark



Caption 15: Michael Classon, benefactor and teacher, Newpark Comprehensive School

As well as the Parkers, Avoca also had another pioneering teacher, Michael Classon, who played a significant role in the creation of both Newpark Comprehensive School and the Newpark Music Centre. Classon also took over the running of the primary school after the Parkers.

On foot of the announcement in 1967 by the politician Donogh O'Malley, who promised free education for all, Classon and his wife Joyce purchased Melfield, Belfort and the entire 10-acre site in 1968 for £25,000 and immediately signed it into a charitable trust. Classon described the site at that time as having an avenue of beech trees, significant orchards and three tennis courts. Melfield was converted into Avoca & Kingstown Primary School in this year and remained as such until 1986.

*"I remember being creative and dancing in the large room and learning to play recorder in one of the small classrooms" –*

*Victoria Berrada Marr, former pupil, Avoca Junior School*

As well as providing the finance to acquire the site and overseeing the amalgamation of the two schools, Classon was also involved hands-on in repairing Melfield.



Caption 16: Pupils outside Avoca Junior School, c. 1980s.



Caption 17: Newpark Comprehensive School, opened in 1972 and was a pioneering school, which fostered a pluralist community inclusive of social, cultural, religious and ethnic diversity.

To meet criteria to build Newpark Comprehensive School, Avoca amalgamated with a local secondary school, Kingstown Grammar, based in Dun Laoghaire since 1894 and became Avoca & Kingstown. Newpark Comprehensive opened in 1972 and was a pioneering school, with a broad curriculum of both academic and vocational subjects and which, though offering free second-level education to the Protestant community, also fostered a pluralist community inclusive of social, cultural, religious and ethnic diversity.

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## Newpark Music School/Academy

An intense love and appreciation of music drove Michael Classon, now Deputy Principal of Newpark School and the Principal Dr John Harris, to found Newpark Music School in 1979. Both men identified a strong need to provide music education in the South Dublin region. Originally housed in the upper gate lodge of the site, it moved to Melfield after Avoca & Kingstown Junior School closed in 1986.

**NEWPARK**  
ACADEMY of MUSIC Est. 1979



Caption 18: Melfield in the 1990s, shortly after it began life as the Newpark Music Centre



Captions 19 and 20: Newpark Academy of Music offers students a wide variety of individual and ensemble lessons students and festival winners perform at the annual concert in the National Concert Hall

The first Musical Director was William Watson, followed by Simon Taylor, Geraldine McDonnell, Hilda Milner, Nigel Flegg, Niall O'Brien, Dr Andrew Jordan, Grace Tallon and is under the auspices of Hilda Chan currently. Gradually the school evolved to become one of the foremost music schools in South Dublin and was particularly renowned for jazz, having the longest running jazz course in the country. In 2017 the jazz degree course, accredited by Berklee College of Music in Boston, was transferred to Dublin City University.

The Academy now employs over 30 teachers and provides a wide variety of individual and ensemble lessons to over 1,200 pupils who come from a diverse range of backgrounds and ethnicities.



Captions 21 and 22: Newpark students and festival winners perform at the annual concert in the National Concert Hall



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**NEWPARK**  
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NEWPARK NIPPERS



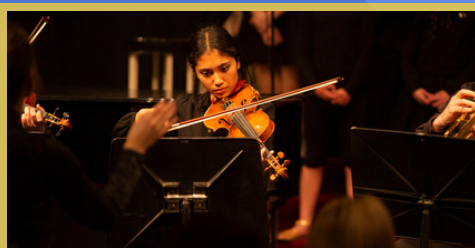
GATEWAY TO MUSIC



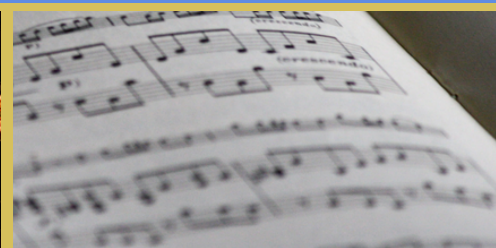
GATEWAY TO INSTRUMENTS



MICRO COURSES



INDIVIDUAL LESSONS



THEORY



CHOIRS



JAZZ AT NEWPARK



ENSEMBLES

## Conclusion

For over 200 years the rooms and corridors of Melfield House have resounded with music, verse, dance and the spoken word. Under its first occupant there were undoubtedly parties and gatherings of colourful musicians and artists of the day.

Then, as a progressive school that deeply valued music and art as subjects, the house was full of music and life once again. And finally, as Newpark Music Academy this is a building with music in its DNA, as it reverberates with strings, keyboards, wind and percussion in every style and variety of music imaginable. Melfield is still here - a little the worse for wear and in need of much repair - but as mellifluous as ever!

## Acknowledgements

**Curator:** Sharon McCrossan-Burrell. **Graphic Design:** Heidi Walsh.

The exhibition is dedicated to **Michael Classon**, who provided the bulk of information about Melfield in the modern era. Thanks also to Peter Agnew for providing images and to the National Library of Ireland for allowing access to the Atkinson Collection. This exhibition was part funded by the Heritage Office, Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council.

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