Prehen House is one of the finest early eighteenth-century houses in Ulster. It was built c.1740 to designs by the distinguished architect Michael Priestley. Around the same time, Honoria Tomkins, daughter and heiress of Alexander Tomkins, whose family had resided at Prehen since the 1660s, married Andrew Knox, MP for County Donegal.

Andrew Knox was descended from Bishop Andrew Knox, born in Ranfurly, Renfrewshire, who had moved to County Donegal from Scotland in 1611. Generations of the Knox family have played a prominent role in the history of Derry. Prehen House is today the home of the Peck family, descendants of the Knoxes of Prehen.

The most famous story connected with Prehen House concerns Mary Ann Knox, granddaughter of Andrew Knox MP. John MacNaughton, a spendthrift member of the north Antrim gentry, had tried to entice Mary Ann into marrying him, but her family would have none of it, believing he was only after her fortune. Undeterred, MacNaughton plotted to seize Mary Ann by force when the Knox family decided to journey to Dublin in November 1761.

At Cloghcor, near Strabane, MacNaughton and his accomplices rushed out to attack the coach. In the ensuing fight MacNaughton fired a shot that fatally wounded Mary Ann – it was believed that he actually intended to kill her father. MacNaughton was captured, stood trial in Lifford and was found guilty of murder.

The date set for his execution was 15 December 1761. When he first threw himself off the scaffold the rope around his neck broke. Some thought this would allow him a chance to escape, while others interpreted it as a sign of his innocence. However, reputedly declaring that no-one would ever remember him as ‘Half-Hanged MacNaughton’, he waited until a fresh rope was fastened around his neck. This rope did not fail. Ironically, he has been known ever since as ‘Half-Hanged MacNaughton’.

ARCHAEOLOGY AT PREHEN
A number of years ago an unusual piece of curving masonry was noticed by local historian Annesley Malley, attached to stone outbuildings. Excavations subsequently revealed the existence of a large circular stone-built flanker (a gun turret) from an early 1600s fortified house or bawn. A single gun loop survives pointing roughly north through the wall of the flanker. Some foundations may yet survive beneath the ground surface. The flanker was reworked a number of times as a garden feature in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and fragments of fine creamware plates and old bottles, possibly from picnicking and entertaining in the garden, were found.

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