

The history of Lisburn town can be traced back to the beginning of the 16th century. At the time there were three small Irish forts in the area. The main one was at the back of where Wallace Park now stands. It was called Lis-na-garvoch meaning the Fort of the Gamester; this is where the name Lisnagarvey originated. Similar forts and small villages were dotted around the countryside, which was heavily wooded. By the end of the 16th century Shane O'Neill owned much of the land and three castles, one was in the Castle Gardens area; this site would have provided a geographical advantage against any enemy due to its strategic location.

By 1585 Queen Elizabeth was sending forces to Ulster to defeat Hugh O'Neill, finally accomplished in 1602. Elizabeth was succeeded by James I in 1603. He pardoned the O'Neils but confiscated their land which were passed on to Sir Fulke Conway a commander in the English army and owner of Conway Castle in North Wales. The modern layout of the town dates from this time. The town grew around the Castle. The ground plot of Lisnagarvey clearly shows what are now Castle Street, Bow Street and Bridge Street. In 1623 the Church of St Thomas was built as a private chapel to the Castle.

In 1624 Sir Fulke Conway died without an heir, the property passed to his brother Edward who began to build a new property on the original site. Sir Edward was given the title of 1st Viscount Conway and Killultagh, more lands and charter rights to the town by Charles I. Sir George Rawdon was Conway's agent. He married the second Viscount's daughter and lived at the Castle, managing the Conway estates for nearly fifty years. In 1662 George II granted Cathedral status to the church as a reward to the people of Lisburn for its loyalty to the crown during the Civil War. He also granted leave for a weekly market to be held.

The 1641 Rebellion

As England was engaged in a Civil War, Irish leaders thought it would be an opportune time to rebel against the English settlers. Led by Sir Phelim O'Neill the Irish attacked Lisnagarvey where Lord Conway had a garrison. The main fighting took place around what is now Bridge Street and Castle Street. Casualties numbered between 300-600. The Irish were defeated. In 1707 the town suffered from an accidental fire. The castle and cathedral were burned. The Cathedral was rebuilt but the Castle was not.

The Seymour Conways

Edward, Earl of Conway had no sons. His sister Dorothy married Rawdon but their eldest son Arthur received little on the 3rd Viscount's death. His cousin Popham Seymour inherited the estate. By the terms of the will, Popham became Seymour-Conway. When he died, his younger brother Francis inherited the estate. He became the first of Marquis of Hertford.

After the fire of 1707 Francis sought to help the town by renewing his tenant's leases for a year or two rent free, as well as giving them as much wood as they needed. The former castle grounds were landscaped and used as a recreation area. The Hertfords preferred to live between England and France. The third Marquis never visited Lisburn at all preferring to collect great works of art to any landlord activity. The fourth Marquis made one visit remarking "Well, I see it for the first time, and pray God for the last time!" The town and lands passed in regular succession until 1870.

Sir Richard Wallace

In 1870 the last Marquis of Hertford died and left his lands in Ireland and France to Sir Richard Wallace, accepted to be the illegitimate son of the fourth Marquis. There was a lawsuit over the inheritance as a third cousin; Sir Hamilton Seymour felt it should have gone to him. Previous landlords had never lived in the town or taken much interest in it. During Sir Richard Wallace's time the town benefited greatly from his generosity. He built a house for himself in Castle Street, although he never lived there. He renovated the Market House by having the roof replaced and its dome re-coppered. The courthouse was built in 1883 and still bore the Wallace coat of arms until it was demolished in 1971. The union bridge was widened and improved. He gave 25 acres of land to the town (Wallace Park). He also founded what is now Wallace High School. Sir Richard Wallace had no heir and the title passed to Sir John Murray Scott. He gave Castle Gardens to the people of Lisburn. The Wallace name is internationally recognised in connection with the art collection at Hertford House in London.