

National University of Ireland  
St. Patrick's College,  
Maynooth

The Famine Years in Queen's County 1845-1850

By

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IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF M.A.  
DEPARTMENT OF MODERN HISTORY,  
ST. PATRICK'S COLLEGE,  
MAYNOOTH

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August 1996

*Dedicated to the memory of those who lived and  
died in Queen's county during the Famine.*

## **Summary**

*This thesis is a local study of the nationwide calamity of the Irish famine 1845-1850 and how it effected the county of Queen's. In general it attempts to assess the overall effect of the famine on the population, who was effected and how they were effected. It gives a more in depth analysis of the relief measures that were carried out in the county and the government response to the disaster.*

*The first chapter deals with the county as a whole and it's situation prior to the famine. It looks at the people of the county and the methods by which they supported themselves. They are broadly divided into two groups those who were land owning and those who rented land and worked it in small farm units. Of the later group the labourers who had very little land and who survived solely on the potato were the worst effected by the famine. The consequences for them of the failure of the potato crop were largely disease, death, or emigration.*

*In the second chapter the aim is to assess the measures of relief that were provided by the government. The government largely left the responsibility of relief to the land owners. The kind of relief varied from public works, (roads, drainage and fencing) soup kitchens and food depots. The land owners in the county made great efforts to relieve distress but lack of resources finally meant that the government had to change their methods of relief.*

*The new approach was a reliance on the Poor Law Unions for the relief of the destitute. In Queen's the records survive for the Mountmellick Union so what follows in the third chapter, is a case study of the union during the famine from the view of the Guardians who ran the workhouse. The day to day running of the house as well as the important issues which faced them as the famine worsened are examined.*

*The conclusions reached include Queen's as being one of the worst effected counties in the province of Leinster in terms of population decline during the famine. Furthermore it seems that in general the relief measures established by the government and run by the land owners proved inadequate yet it must be said that the local property owners in general did all that was possible with the resources available to them.*

# Acknowledgements

A number of persons and institutions have assisted in the writing of this thesis and I wish to thank them. I am grateful to my supervisor Dr. Raymond Gillespie who guided my research and gave much advice while writing this. A number of Libraries have been of assistance; the National Library, Laois County Library and Maynooth College Library. I would like to make mention of the help given to me by the archivists in the National Archives in the areas of the Relief Commission and the Board of Works. They gave great advice in my search for material on Queen's county. A special mention should be made of the staff of Laois County Library: Patricia Lynch and Celine Coughlan. Also the County Librarian, Mr. Eamon Phelan and the assistant Librarian, Mr. Paddy Macken, who allowed me access to the records I needed. I had encouragement and helpful insights from Co. Offaly local historian, Paddy Heaney; for this I am grateful. I would like to acknowledge the work of both Margaret Kennedy and Christopher Mc Camley, my voluntary proof readers.

I cannot thank my parents Anne and Bill enough for their support which came in every shape and form. It was they who gave me the enthusiasm to carry out this work. I will remain eternally in their debt. Lastly I want to say thanks to all my family and friends who have given welcome encouragement.

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### Note on Currency:

Money values are expressed throughout in contemporary pre decimal terms. A pound (£) comprised twenty shillings (20s).A shilling comprised twelve pence (12d).A guinea was worth twenty one shillings.

## Introduction

The Irish Famine of 1845-1850 is an event that effected the entire country in some way. Queen's county was no exception; it inevitably suffered the distress which the failure of the potato crop brought with it. Queen's county, a midland county in the province of Leinster now known as Laois, is unique in one sense in so far as it does not touch a county that touches the sea. It is also unique in the history of the famine and it is this unique history which I hope to tell in as complete a way as is possible.

The county is bounded on the east by the counties of Kildare and Carlow, on the north by Offaly (King's county) and on the west by both Offaly and Tipperary. The county has an area of 396,810 acres of which a sizeable portion is mountain and bog land. Both Maps One and Two show the areas of mountain while map one also indicates the areas of bog land. The north west of the county is covered by the Slieve Bloom mountains; there are also large areas of high ground to the south and south east. Mountain, bogs and rock would have made cultivation difficult, if not impossible, in places. The River Nore flows through the county and the River Barrow has its source in the county. A lot of drainage work has been carried out over the years during and since the famine. The farming land in the county was effected more by these geographical features during the famine years.

The rivers would have caused flooding at certain times of the year and bogs since reclaimed would not have facilitated cultivation. This information is relevant when we see the areas in the county that were most badly effected by the famine.

The third, fourth and fifth maps give the boundaries of the parishes, the baronies and the poor law unions. These are vital to an understanding of the famine in the county since the relief that was given in the early years, 1845-1846, was distributed through the baronies, that of the later years was given primarily through the poor law unions. The effect of the famine in terms of population decline can also be seen in the statistics of each barony in the census returns.

The event of the famine has been written about extensively and it would be difficult to examine all of the material on this aspect of Irish history. The general works on the famine are numerous and most of them give detailed accounts of the causes and consequences of the famine in Ireland. I have relied on the account by Christine Kinealy entitled, *This Great Calamity*, for the background information, the government relief measures and the countrywide statistics. For detailed information on certain specific or particular aspects I explored accounts such as that on the Poor Law by Helen Burke, *The People and the Poor Law in 19th century Ireland* and John O'Connor's work, *The Workhouses of Ireland*. The account of Quaker relief by Rob Goodbody, *A suitable*

channel, contained useful detail necessary on the measures the Quakers took throughout Ireland in the relief of famine. I consulted many articles and general histories for the background to the famine and the state of the country before the failure of the potato crop, all of which is listed in the bibliography.

The primary source materials for history of the famine are good since, by the 19th century the keeping of records was very comprehensive. The relief measures were carried out locally but they were instigated under the rule of law and so Government agencies kept records of what occurred in the country. The records of the Relief Commission are very detailed for Queen's county; the Board of Works records however fall down in terms of the local sources and leave very few clues about the nature of the public works carried out in Queen's county. The Society of Friends, (Quakers) relief of distress papers are comprehensive in recording the relief given throughout the country including Queen's. A contemporary work about the county in general by Sir Charles Coote written in 1800 and what is included in Lewis's *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* about Queen's were useful in giving a view of the county before the famine began. William Steuart Trench's account of his time in Queen's during the famine gives a more individual feel to what happened in the county.

The sources which I used for the third chapter were the minute books of the Board of Guardians for



Mountmellick Union, one of two Poor Law Unions in the county. The difficulty with this source was the absence of the book for 1847 which made it difficult to be sure about what happened in the workhouse in that year. The other vital records missing here are the books that recorded the admissions into the house; the records are patchy throughout the country and unfortunately have been lost for the Mountmellick union. The other union in the county, Abbeyleix Union has no surviving records apart from what exists as part of the Poor Law Commission annual reports. The *Leinster Express* a contemporary newspaper, proved very valuable but, as with the rest of the sources that survive, gives an account of the famine from the view of the gentry and the administration. The largest gap in the sources is that there are very few accounts of the famine from the point of view of the labourer or tenant farmer in the county; only one letter from a man directly effected by the famine exists in the Relief Commission records for Queen's. Those most directly effected by the famine can only be written about in terms of what others say about them or by the statistics that we have; essentially we do not have their side of the story. It is unfortunate but it does not mean that the account of the famine in the Queen's is invalid since the other sources do provide enough information about the effects of famine in the county.

It is my intention with the sources that are available to me to write an account of the famine years 1845-1850

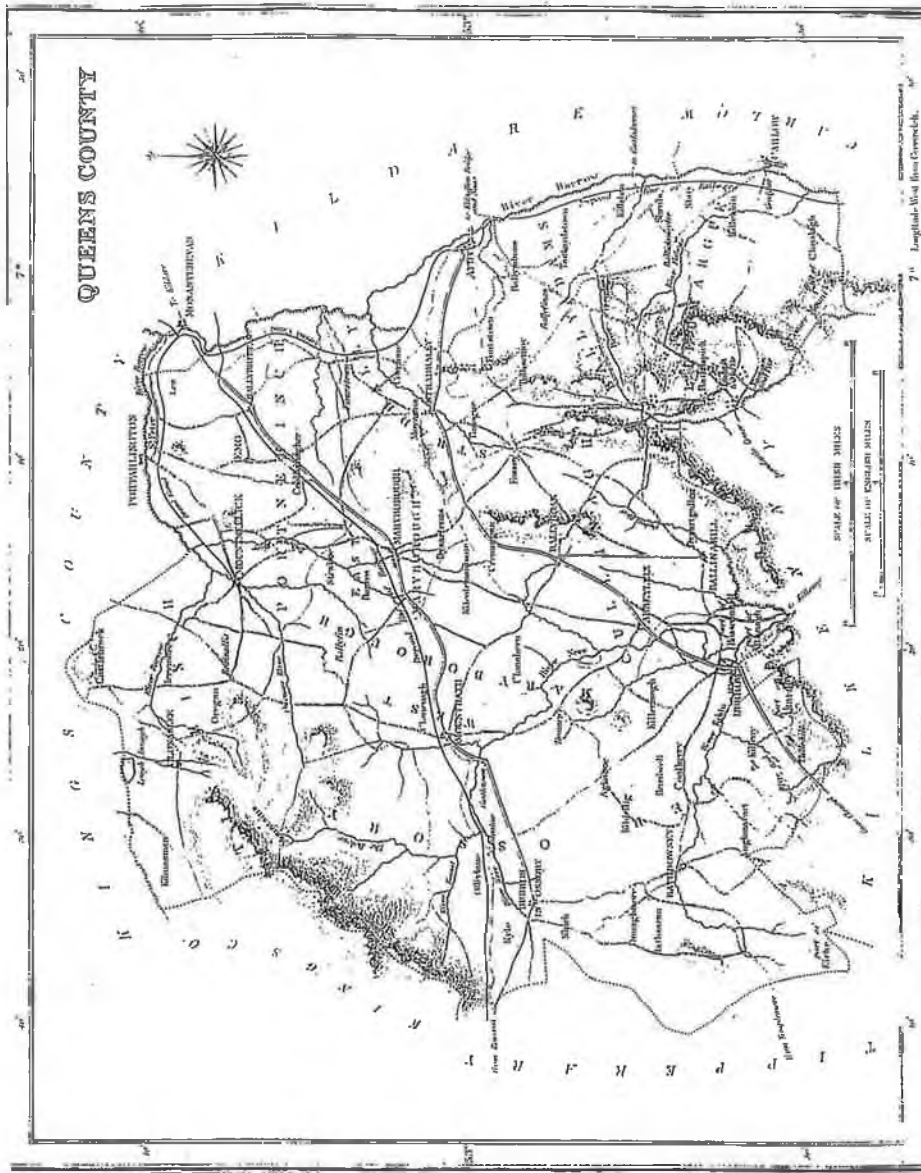
in the county of Queen's. No previous work has been written on the famine years in this county to the best of my knowledge and the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the famine has brought a new interest in the subject. For these reasons and because I am a native of the county I chose to write on the subject. During the course of the work I discovered that some of the sources about the famine in the county are patchy; the estates records for the county which would have recorded evictions, estate relief work and perhaps personal views on the crisis were non-existent. One estate that of the Viscount de Vesce in Abbeyleix, has just handed over its estate records to the National Library this year. It will be interesting to see if they contain anything about the famine since the 3rd Viscount Thomas de Vesce was involved in the local relief efforts and was also a member of the board of guardians for the Abbeyleix union. Many estate owners carried out works of improvement on their estates; we know this from the amount of loans that were given by the Board of Works during the famine but details of these are also missing.

What follows is three chapters; the first takes a look at the condition of the county before the famine and it is based on contemporary accounts and census returns. I also include some figures and detail on the effect of the famine on what was largely a prospering county. The second chapter deals with the relief measures that were provided by the Government and also by voluntary bodies

(records exist only for the Society of Friends). The third chapter is essentially a case study of a Poor Law union, that of Mountmellick, since the records of the other union in the county have been lost. I consider it was appropriate to put this chapter last because the early relief measures that had proved inadequate meant that the Government in the last years of the famine relied on the Poor law unions to relieve the famine victims in the workhouses and also with outdoor relief.

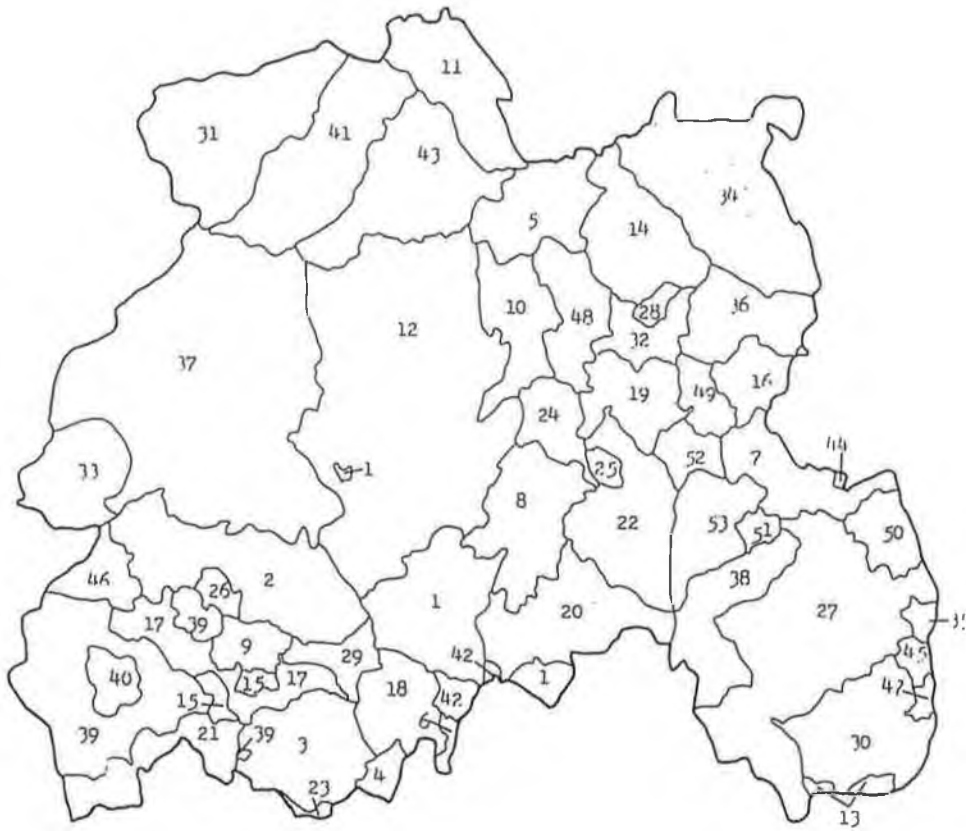


Map 2



### Map 3

## THE PARISHES OF COUNTY LEIX (QUEEN'S COUNTY)



- |                  |                   |                 |
|------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| 1 Abbeyleix      | 18 Durrow         | 35 Monksgrange  |
| 2 Aghaboe        | 19 Dysartenos     | 36 Moyanna      |
| 3 Aghmacarti     | 20 Dysartgallen   | 37 Offerlane    |
| 4 Aharney        | 21 Erke           | 38 Rathaspick   |
| 5 Ardea          | 22 Fossy or       | 39 Rathdowney   |
| 6 Attanagh       | Timahoe           | 40 Rathsaran    |
| 7 Ballyadams     | 23 Glashare       | 41 Rearymore    |
| 8 Ballyroan      | 24 Kilcolmanbane  | 42 Rosconnell   |
| 9 Bordwell       | 25 Kilcolmanbrack | 43 Rosenallis   |
| 10 Borris        | 26 Kildellig      | 44 St. John's   |
| 11 Castlebrack   | 27 Killabban      | 45 Shrute       |
| 12 Clonenagh and | 28 Killenny       | 46 Skirk        |
| Clonagheen       | 29 Killermogh     | 47 Sleaty       |
| 13 Cloydagh      | 30 Killeshin      | 48 Straboe      |
| 14 Coolbanagher  | 31 Kilmanman      | 49 Stradbally   |
| 15 Coolkerry     | 32 Killeale       | 50 Tankardstown |
| 16 Curraclone    | 33 Kyle           | 51 Tecolm       |
| 17 Donaghmore    | 34 Lea            | 52 Timogue      |
|                  |                   | 53 Tullomoy     |

## Map 4

### THE BARONIES OF COUNTY LEIX (QUEEN'S COUNTY)



#### THE DIOCESES OF COUNTY LEIX

**KILDARE:** Baronies of Portnahinch & Tinnahinch

**LEIGHLIN:** Baronies of Slievemargy, Stradbally and Maryborough East & West; Culllenagh exc. 42; Ballyadams exc. 44 & 50; 1

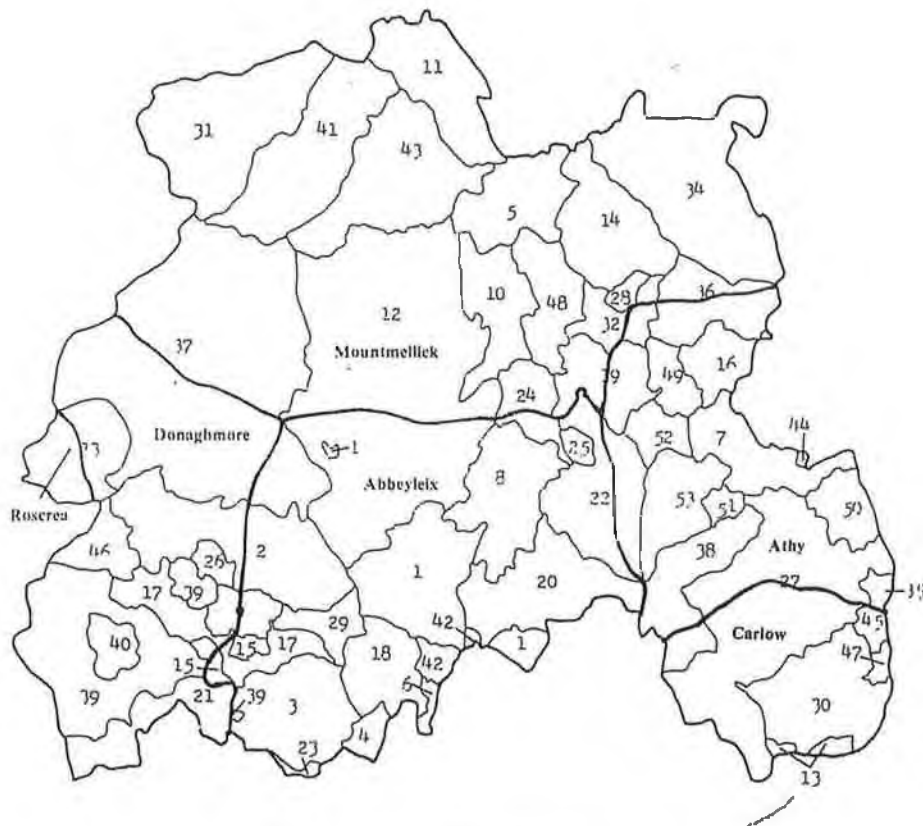
**OSSORY:** Clandonagh Barony exc. 33; Clarmallagh exc. 1; 37 & 42

**DUBLIN:** 44 & 50

**KILLALOE:** 33

Map 5

THE POOR LAW UNIONS OF COUNTY LEIX  
(QUEEN'S COUNTY)



THE PROBATE DISTRICTS OF COUNTY LEIX

KILKENNY: All parishes



## Chapter One

### Queen's County Before The Famine

Queen's county or Laois, is a little known county. References to it are often met with a blank expression which seems to say 'Where on earth is that'. Unfortunately Queen's county has often fallen into this category when it comes to the writing of history, though rather than the blank expression we get the blank page. In the history of the famine the county gets mention here and there as part of the overall statistics of destitution and relief. Queen's county if we compare it to the other counties, suffered a larger decline in population than most of the counties in Leinster. The decline in Queen's was 28 per cent, while County Meath had a drop of 23 per cent, Kilkenny 22 per cent and King's county (Offaly) 23 per cent. The average decline in population for the province was 15 per cent. In Connaught the percentage fall in population was higher than in Leinster; in Clare the decline was 25 per cent, Leitrim 27 per cent, Mayo 29 per cent and Sligo 28 per cent. The average decline for this province was 28 per cent and Queen's county was in terms of population drop as badly affected as some of the western counties.<sup>1</sup> It can safely be said that the county suffered during the famine years and there is a story to tell and it is this story that I hope to tell in as full a way as possible with the sources available.

To begin with I think it essential to give a picture of the county before the famine years. This will give a

clearer picture of the enormity of the famine disaster. Queen's county was, before the famine, a relatively prosperous county and the fact that it was so badly effected by the blight is really an indication of what a calamity the whole nation was faced with at this time. It is fortunate that Queen's county was surveyed by a member of the gentry in 1800, a resident of the county, Sir Charles Coote also a member of parliament for the county in that year. We can be wary of his account as being from only one member of society and perhaps a somewhat biased account. Yet if we look at it in terms of the statistics and also remain conscious of who is writing then we can glean a lot of information about the state of the county.

The Queen's county is an inland county, in the province of Leinster bounded on the east by Kildare and on the south by Kilkenny. The county consists of 235,300 acres of which at this time 164,526 acres paid cess (tax). A large area of the county is bog, mountain and wasteland 70,774 acres in all.<sup>2</sup> In the survey we are given an estimate of the population at the turn of the century. Coote's estimates allow a population of approximately 90,000 persons. The county is subdivide into 9 Baronies these are as follows, Cullinagh, Upper Ossory, Maryborough East and West, Portnahinch, Ballyadams, Tinnehinch, Stradbally and Slivemargue. As with the whole of Ireland, Queen's county being no exception, the land was divided into estates; the

owners of the estates let this land in tenures of large and small farms. Lands were set on farms of 500 to 5 acres, the average size of farms being 250 for large farms and 15 for small.<sup>3</sup> The peasant's houses were usually attached to an acre or half an acre of garden for their potatoes. The house of the peasant on Coote's observations were:

superior to any in the neighbouring counties yet few indeed deserve a better distinction than hovels and truly it may be said that bogs in England have more comfortable dwellings than the majority of the peasantry in Ireland.<sup>4</sup>

He praises the landowners who, he says in the absence of any suitable Poor Law have taken care of the poor of the county. This can hardly be taken as an objective view since he being a member of this class, he is not going to malign them. There is little information about the work of the gentry in the support of the poor. In a report that examined the state of the poor in the county in 1830 the following information reveals some of the support that the gentry offered the poor. The charitable institutions in the county were run not only on Government funding but also on subscriptions most likely to have come from the wealthy landed class. An infirmary in Maryborough was run on private subscriptions and on grand jury presentments which meant that it was funded completely on local monies:

There were ten dispensaries in the county they were run on parliamentary grants and on voluntary subscriptions a large proportion of the money being from subscriptions the total spent in 1825 was £1,159 and of this £579 were voluntary subscriptions.<sup>5</sup>

There was no house of industry, fever hospital or other asylum in the county in 1830. Coote does not give details of the support but asserts that it has been given in abundance:

Everyone is left to his own feelings and abilities to relieve the distressed and greatly to the honour of the affluent gentry in this county, to which some absentees made very munificent contributions the poor have been maintained in these two later years of exampled scarcity with care and great humanity.<sup>6</sup>

Coote proceeds to make a more detailed description of the county. Slievemargue was a highly populated area with in general a large amount of profitable farming and many adjoining industries. The potato was in poorer areas the main source of nutrition. Cullinagh had two towns Ballinakill and Abbeyleix. The land was cultivated for mainly four crops oats, barley potatoes and grass. Upper Ossory had a large district of mountainous land so mainly sheep grazing was carried out there; only one third of the farming enterprise was tillage. Maryborough was described as having a rich, luxuriant landscape where every kind of farming was practised. Ballyadams was a small area where farms were from 3 to 4 acres, the country being highly populated and poor. Portnahinch was also well populated with potatoes the main crop grown. Tinnehinch had large areas of unprofitable bog; potatoes were the universally cultivated crop both in uplands and lowlands.

This survey was carried out over forty years before the

famine and already in most of the areas there was a dependence on the potato crop. This was even before the large increase in population. At that time "all produces a sufficiency for home consumption".<sup>7</sup>

Coote's observations of Queen's county are in keeping with the developments in the country as a whole. His reference to a time of acute hardship is not unusual since prior to 1845 Ireland had suffered a number of subsistence crises. What made the famine of 1845 to 1850 all the worse was a larger population the repeated failure of the potato crop and inadequate relief measures. Reference to dependence on the potato crop was also apparent throughout the rest of the country as the century progressed. "What can be stated unequivocally is that the potato was a dietary staple by the 1840's."<sup>8</sup>

It must be said that all those who were outside the landed gentry did not share the same conditions. Labourers and cottiers had very different circumstances; cottiers were paid 6d to 8d in wages and often paid 2 guineas per annum for a house and one acre. The cottier also had the privilege of rearing on the land a calf, a pig and poultry; the average size cottier farm was 15 acres. Labourers, on the other hand, were subject to much harsher conditions. If they were able to find work they would be paid 8d in winter and 13d in summer per day. Coote points out that the number of poor were increasing and that there were no charitable

institutions in the county except for a lace manufacturer in Abbeyleix. This institution gave employment to 50 girls; the profits from their work was to defray the expense of their keep and education. This establishment was begun by Lady de Vesce wife of Viscount de Vesce who was an M.P. for the county during the famine years and owner of a large estate in Abbeyleix. It seems that the resident land owners of the county were in some small way involved in the relief of distress. As with any county the support of land owners would vary from area to area; hence the famine was bound to have different effects depending on the area in the county. The poor of the county, it seems, would have suffered on account of the cost of the food that was available when the potato failed. Provisions, we are told by Coote, were:

rather dearer in this county than in those adjoining and this is accounted for by the number of resident gentry, and the towns well inhabited by wealthy traders.<sup>9</sup>

Commerce of the county comprised of manufacture of serge, the collieries and, of course, agriculture. The primary agricultural enterprises were cattle rearing, growing wheat, oats, barley and potatoes. It appears that at the turn of the century Queen's county was quite prosperous with a large amount of resident gentry who had up to that time been responsible for the support the poor of the county along with the Government. It is on this group of land owners that the responsibility for famine relief was

given.

Lewis's *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*, 1837 gives us further insight into the county as it approaches the famine years. The grand juries were responsible for the collection of tax and its distribution throughout the county. In 1835 the presentments amounted to £21,143,15s,7d. This was spent as follows £293,16s,0d for roads and bridges and £4,124,16s,1/4d for individual baronies. A further £9,835,15s,3/4d was for public buildings, charities, officers salaries and incidents. £6,680,5s,2d for police and £541 for repayments to the government. Unfortunately the presentment for the famine years are not available to us; having these records would enable us to see how much money was given to charity during the famine years. In 1847 the grand juries were allowed to give money to public works where they saw fit and this would be another vital clue to the activities for relieving distress. Lewis tells us that the average size of farms in the county was 12 to 14 acres; if we had some more detail we could see what areas of the county had come under the most subdivision and where there was most dependence on the potato crop. Lewis makes no reference to the dependence of a large group on the potato crop. He concentrates on the advances in agriculture that had been made by the large land owners in the county:

Some noblemen and landed proprietors hold large tracts of land in their own hands, the superior cultivation of which is very effective as a leading example towards the general improvement



of agriculture in the county.<sup>10</sup>

Dairies, he says, were numerous and productive; cheese was made in small quantities but butter was the chief produce. Pigs he says were reared in every farm house. Before the famine there were five collieries at work but their failure before the famine meant that this was one of the worst hit areas.

A decline in the industries of some other areas was also able to account for the severity of the famine there. For example Mountmellick was a prosperous town at the start of the 1830s; the industries there were weaving of cotton, this employed 2,000 people in the town and surrounding neighbourhood. The manufacture of woollen stuffs and cloth was also conducted he says, on an extensive scale. There were three breweries, a flour mill, soup factories and a distillery for whiskey. The economic crisis of the 1820s was the most severe in decades; during this time the textile industries suffered the most and the decline which began then was never redressed. The town had begun to lose some of its industries and employment before the famine began.

As to the condition of the people, Lewis seems to give a very similar picture to that of Coote:

The middle classes of the gentry pay much attention to the improvement and embellishment of their grounds; their dwelling houses are handsome and convenient, with suitable offices.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand the habitations of the peasantry though in many parts superior to those of the neighbouring counties are very deficient in appearance or in internal comfort.<sup>12</sup>

There were areas of prosperity such as Abbeyleix and Castletown while the northern barony of Tinnehinch was very poor. The houses there are "little better than hovels and in the neighbourhood of the collieries still worse".<sup>13</sup> It is quite ironic that in an area of prosperity in terms of industry the people were actually the poorest in the county.

Population statistics can also tell us a lot about the county. Queen's county as with all other counties in the country had a rising population for the decades before the famine. Cullen tells us that:

the growth in pre-famine population was reflected in a disproportionate increase in the population of smallholders in the thinly populated, but relatively barren lands along the west where an abundance of waste land and low living standards weakened incentives to caution. In other areas labourers increased disproportionately to farming families.<sup>14</sup>

The later statement is true for Queen's county. Contrary to popular belief Ireland's population was not excessively large. "The rapid rise in population in Ireland in the century before the famine is part of a European wide phenomenon".<sup>15</sup> It was in line with the rest of Europe as was its birth and marriage rates. Farmers managed to maintain a varied diet; as we have seen pigs and poultry were commonly reared on farms. While labourers and smallholders in poorer regions, however, became dependent on the potato as the dominant part of their diet. What is significant is that urban population did not keep pace with rural population. In 1841 the rural population was 138,873

and the urban population was 15,057. The level of industrialisation did not mean that towns grew to the extent that they did in England. Few of the major towns apart from Dublin and Belfast expanded between 1821 and 1841 though some towns, for example, did expand in economic importance, Tullamore, Maryborough and Mountmellick. Essentially Ireland became more rural and agricultural than it had previously been. Since labourers were the only group dependent on the potato as their only source of nutrition they were the first and the most badly hit.

The following are the demographic changes in Queen's county before and after the famine. Coote guessed that the population of the county in 1800 was approximately 90,000 persons. A steady increase in population continued until 1841, the last record of the population until the post-famine census of 1851. The population was as follows:<sup>16</sup>

<u>1821:</u>	<u>134,275</u>
<u>1831:</u>	<u>145,851</u>
<u>1841:</u>	<u>153,930</u>

A further investigation of the census figures gives us a lot of information about the condition of the people in the county. The following table gives the number of families in the county dependent on agriculture and trade/manufacturing in the years prior to the famine.<sup>17</sup>

1831 Employment

1841 Employment

Agriculture: 17,164

Agriculture:19,346

Trade and Manufacture:4,367

Trade and Manu:5,093

All other classes:3,872

All others:3,003

The number of families dependent on agriculture for their living had increased in the ten years and it can be assumed that the number of labouring families increased in line with this overall figure. In 1841 the census returns classified labour as follows: food 40,301; clothing 9,715; lodging 3,249; health 111; charity 20; justice 420; education 354; religion 121; and unclassified 7,767. The number with no stated means was 36,799. The number employed was 62,058 out of a population of 153,930 which meant that the young and old numbered 55,073. These people were dependent upon the members of the family able to work for support. The average size of a family in 1841 was six including the parents. The small towns had to deal with the large population of poor labourers which flocked there to the workhouses for shelter and food. The census of 1841 also gives us some indication of the conditions in which the people lived. For example the following table indicates the type of housing occupied by the people in the county.

<u>Houses 1841</u>	/	<u>% population in each class</u>
1st class :	2.7%	/ 2.9%
2nd class :	20.3%	/ 20.7%
3rd class :	50.4%	/ 49.9%
4th class :	26.6%	/ 26.5%

Queen's county had primarily a rural population occupying land or labouring on it. The majority lived in second, third and fourth class housing. It can also be noted that the county had a sizeable percentage living in second class accomodation, an indication of a wealthier small farmer grouping who were able to afford improvements to housing and who did not have to rely on the potato for their survival.

The number of people who were dependent is also important to note. In 1841 the overall figure of people dependent was 91,872; this is the figure of unemployed plus those under fifteen years of age. This means that changes in the family support system would have a major effect on a large number of people. The large group of rural people dependent on the potato and with no skill except the labour of their own hands was going to be very badly effected once the blight hit the potato crop.

Following the harrowing years of the famine from 1845 until 1850 the population of the county was seriously

reduced. The 1841 figure of 153,930 had become 111,664, a decline of some 28 per cent due both to death and emigration. The number of families in agriculture dropped from 19,346 to 12,971. The figures for the baronies show that some areas were worse hit than others. The following table shows the drop in population in each barony.

<u>Barony</u>	<u>Drop</u>	<u>%Drop</u>
Ballyadams	2,796	30%
Clondonagh	5,319	32%
Clarmallagh	4,789	32%
Cullenagh	4,171	25%
Maryborough East	2,216	21%
Maryborough West	4,852	28%
Portnahinch	2,046	13%
Slievemargue	4,532	26%
Stradbally	2,207	25%
Tinnehinch	6,416	35%
Upperwoods	<u>2,922</u>	<u>28%</u>
<b>Total</b>	<b><u>41,866</u></b>	<b><u>28%</u></b>

Another effect on the county can be seen at the other end of the scale. Although the labouring poor were the worst and most directly effected it can be seen that in the famine years the resident gentry of the county were also effected. The Government depended on the gentry and the larger smallholders to provide the means of relief for the poor. The result of this for many of the farmers was an inability to pay rent; for landowners it meant large borrowings which left them by the end of the famine years in a bankrupt state.

The Government in dealing with this crisis passed the Incumbered Estates Acts, 1848 and 1849, which allowed for a great change in land ownership in Ireland and in effect marked the start of the decline of the landlords hold on the countries land. A summary of the auctions in the county from 1850 to 1855 shows that in 115 townlands estates were sold and that a total of 1,154 estates were sold in the county; the barony with the most sales was Portnahinch, where 10 percent of townlands had auctions.<sup>18</sup> It can be assumed that a large number of the bankruptcies resulted from the drain on estates resources by the famine. This could be due to the loss of tenants or because of the amount of money spent in relief measures.

Without a doubt the county was effected by the famine in many ways and as with the rest of the country it suffered the lasting effects of the crisis. The county was among those which was to be relieved by Government measures and it is these measures, which I will examine in the following chapters, to see whether or not they met the needs of the people.

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3. Ibid., p. 2.
4. Ibid., p. 4.
5. Select committee on the state of the poor in Ireland and means of improving their condition 1830, Establishments for the relief of the sick or indigent poor. p. 710.
6. C. Coote, A statistical survey of Queen's county, (Dublin 1801), p. 31.
7. Ibid., p. 112.
8. Foster, Modern Ireland 1600-1972, (London, 1988), p. 319.
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11. Ibid., p. 478.
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13. Ibid., p. 478.
14. L.M. Cullen, An economic history of Ireland since 1660, (London 1987), p. 118.
15. Ibid., p. 118.
16. Census of Ireland, 1821, 1831 & 1841.
17. Census of Ireland, 1831 & 1841.
18. Eiriksson, A., & O'Grada., Estates records of the Irish Famine, (Dublin, 1995), p. 57.



## Chapter Two

### The Relief Measures

**" It is true that in the more cultivated districts of the Queens county and the midland counties generally, not many deaths occurred from actual starvation. I mean that people were not found dead on the roads or in the fields from sudden deprivation of food, but they sank gradually from impure and insufficient diet and fever. Dysentery, the crowding in the workhouse, or hardships on the relief works carried thousands to a premature grave."**

W.T.Stewart, *Realities of Irish Life.*

Before the famine in Ireland as we have seen, it was the case that the Irish poor were very much at the mercy of the local landowner. The Poor Law of 1838 which instituted the local poor house could only have been repulsive to the people with its almost prison-like rules and stigma. Since there were large numbers of absentee landowners many of the tenants had no one to come to their aid in times of need. The Irish poor, Asenath Nicholson observed in her travels around Ireland, "above all others, are the most miserable, the most forgotten and the most patient of all beings".<sup>1</sup> This fact was to become an increasing reality during the famine years.

August 1845 was the beginning of a terrible epoch in Irish history. The first reports of a potato blight in Ireland appeared in Fermanagh. In Ireland the potato was often not harvested until October so that in most places all appeared normal until then. The blight was in two respects deceptive; although the stem appeared luxuriant upon digging the root was rotten and in other cases while the potatoes were stored as normal they soon decayed into a black mass. By October Sir Robert Peel

P.M. acknowledged that Ireland was on the brink of a major disaster. The Dublin administration requested detailed returns describing the local situation from members of the coastguard, Constabulary and poor law boards. A scientific commission found that only some three eighths of the usual crop were available for consumption.<sup>2</sup> This report suggested that the blight was more extensive than the Constabulary reports. The only detailed report we have to tell us what happened to the potato crop in Queens is the Constabulary report for the year 1846. We can see the effects of blight by comparing the amount of potatoes that were sown in 1845 with the amount in 1846. There was a sizeable decline in acreage in the county; overall it came to 24%. This shows that the county was effected by the bight in the first year. The following is a table of the returns for nine of the baronies in the county for which returns were made.<sup>3</sup> The table shows the number of acres sown in 1845 and the number sown in 1846, clearly indicating the effect of the blight in the county.

<u>Barony</u>	<u>1845</u>	<u>1846</u>
Ballyadams	1,487	1,264
Clarmallagh/Clandonagh	6,330	4,870
Cullinagh	3,699	4,870
Maryborough East	4,597	3,049
Maryborough West	1,072	907
Portnahinch	4,421	3,579
Tinnehinch	4,317	3,267
Stradbally	<u>1,790</u>	<u>1,584</u>
Total	<u>27,713</u>	<u>20,936</u>

Note: This is based on incomplete returns.

A number of alternative crops were planted in place of potatoes; these included oats, barley, turnips and bere, a type of coarse barley which was used in distilling. Most of the returns say that a large amount of land on which potatoes were normally planted was left idle. It seems that the county was not excessively hit by the blight in that year; the reports of the destruction that the blight brought to the crop in the county in 1846 are minor compared to what was to come. The Constabulary returns unfortunately do not give any indication of the size of individual crops or the measure of dependency on the potato within each area. The nature of the blight was such that adjoining fields could be differently effected so there were bound to be local variations in the demand for relief.

On 10th January 1846 a group of magistrates and local landowners met at Ballickmoyler to inquire into the state of the peasantry. Their report clearly shows that the county had, at least in some areas, been hit badly by the blight. The meeting was convened in order "to propose such measure as may appear most practicable for providing relief in the case of urgent necessity and means for giving employment to the population".<sup>4</sup> It seems that the local gentry were quite ready to take whatever measures that will be necessary to relieve suffering. It is clear that the object of the Government is to provide employment in the event of a scarcity arising from a failure in the potato crop in this populous district.

"Whatever measure is most beneficial to the people will be cheerfully adopted by my brother magistrates and the land holders for it cannot be denied that in this district the potato crop is in a most precarious condition".<sup>5</sup> The meeting was told that it was most likely there would be no potatoes in the district by May 1st 1846. A number of resolutions were made at the meeting by the magistrates and land owners. They were willing to play their role but they also expected the Government to respond with appropriate measures:

That in the opinion of this meeting though there is at present no want of food or a deficiency of employment as compared with former years yet that great distress is likely to arise from the consumption of potatoes the staple food of the peasantry which earlier at this than any former season caused by the prevailing disease. We hope and expect the government in addition to the usual sources to meet the destitution that is likely to arise in this district.<sup>6</sup>

One resident of the county, William Steuart Trench, a land agent to the Marquis of Bath and Lord Digby, came to reside in Cardtown in the Slieve Bloom mountains shortly before the famine. There he undertook a general work of reclamation on the mountain land. He tells us:

I planted in the year of 1846 about one hundred Irish acres (equal to 162 statute acres) of mountain land under potatoes, counting as surely as any farmer can count on reaping any crop.<sup>7</sup>

He says that his reclamation had succeeded beyond his most sanguine expectations and that he had even achieved a gold medal from the Royal Agricultural Society of Ireland. He employed for some years not less than two hundred people in the labour of reclamation, planting and

harvesting the crop. It is his account of the failure of his crop that gives us some indication of the feelings of the people at the realisation that their sole means of survival had been wiped out. He describes how the happy valley at Baureigh on the mountain slopes was turned into a valley of woe:

On August 6, 1846 I shall not readily forget the day I rode up as usual to my mountain property, and my feelings may be imagined when I saw the crop, I smelt the fearful stench, now so well known and recognised as the death-sign of each field of potatoes....The experience of the last few days taught me that all was gone, and the crop utterly worthless.<sup>8</sup>

For Mr Trench it was the loss of a large investment a crop from which he had expected to yield £3,000. This was a big enough blow in itself but he goes on to say that:

my own losses and disappointments, deeply as I felt them, were soon merged in the general desolation, misery and starvation which now rapidly affected the poorer classes around me and in Ireland.<sup>9</sup>

The county was suddenly faced with a great catastrophe; the people who worked for men like Mr Trench suddenly found themselves without work and also without food which had made them self sufficient when they were without work. This was the state of the county in 1846 but before we can understand what happened next we must first look at the Government and its nationwide efforts to relieve distress.

In 1845 Peel's Tory Government was in power and the relief measures of Peel's Government were generally held to be effective. Peels action to repeal the corn

laws was not enough to supply the deficit resulting from the potato blight. Indian corn was imported and extra grants were given to the Board of Public Works. The potato blight in 1845 was seen as a temporary problem and hence all Government remedies were seen as temporary also:

From the very outset it was obvious that the policies of the British government had been created and were to be implemented with a view to bringing home to the landed interest within Ireland the fact that it was ultimately their responsibility to finance and distribute the relief necessary.<sup>10</sup>

The Government took responsibility for the administration of policy. Sir Robert Peel established the Relief Commission; the result of this Commission was the setting up of local relief committees. The local committees were voluntary bodies of notables within the district: landlords, clergy, merchants and large farmers. They were to act as a medium for the purchase and resale of Indian corn and other food. They could also oversee the provision of small works of utility. The activities were to be financed by subscriptions from the local community and the money would be matched by a grant provided by the Government of up to 100 per cent of the amount collected. In February 1846 the duties and instructions for relief committees were issued. During the spring and summer of 1846 almost 700 relief committees were established.<sup>11</sup> The majority were in the south and west of the country but as we will see Queens county was quick to establish large numbers of committees

which is an indication of the necessity of the relief. The committees could purchase food at food depots of which there was one in Durrow. This food was to be sold at cost price and where people did not have the money then a task of work was set this task was to be one of public improvement. A principle which was supposed to be adhered to by the relief committees was that they were under no circumstance to issue money. Food provided was to be sufficient as a fee to a workman and his dependents; only in extreme cases could food be given gratuitously. A register was to be kept of all those given a ticket or certificate for relief. The temporary nature of the relief can be seen in the fact that the Government had decided to close the food depots on 15th August 1846. This policy had to be changed. The problem was that the changes arose under a new Government which was very slow in its response to the hardship being suffered in Ireland. It could be said that a native Government might not have deferred so much to the politics of economics but no Government could have contained the famine.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately the Whig Government under Russell, like its predecessor were very much influenced by the economics of Laissez Faire or free trade. It did not want to interfere with the markets by selling cheap corn; it listened to the protests of traders. In 1846 and 1847 it allowed the price of corn and other food stuffs to rise so that the people were at the mercy of the local



merchants. The fact that people were being relieved by public works was not sufficient, if the money they earned would not buy the food they needed to sustain themselves and their families. The Whig Government when they realised that the crop had failed again, allowed the measures of Peel to stand. Parliament, however, was prorogued in August 1846 Russell did not reassemble it until January 1847. The justification for this was to allow Irish landlord M.P.s to stay at home and become fully involved in the affairs of the country. The Whig administration, even more so than the Tories, believed that the Irish landlords needed to take responsibility for providing relief. This new philosophy was echoed in the measures of relief.

Government intervention, it was feared, would cripple private enterprise and increase the dependence of the people on the Government. The Government did however decide to intervene in the west but not in the east. The local relief committees commenced their relief measures as soon as the blight reappeared. The final two months of 1846 became remarkable for the demands for relief of any kind, Queen's county, as we will see, being no exception. The relief committees were in 1847 no longer allowed to issue the people with tickets for work; they were to charge prices as close as possible to market price in what became an all out attempt to feed the people. Towards the end of the year the relief measures were to be moved completely under the Poor Law. First

let us look at the relief committees in operation the public works and the voluntary relief or the Society of Friends.

### The Relief Committees

The early reports of blight in the potato crop continued in the *Leinster Express* as the year went on. In February the report goes:

We have been informed by a gentleman an extensive land proprietor in the barony of Slievemargue, that in his locality they are nearly all exhausted or rendered useless by the extent of the disease; from other districts we have similar melancholy intelligence.....Under these frightful circumstances can it be deemed that some speedy and effectual remedy must be promptly supplied to meet the exigencies of the case?.<sup>13</sup>

The newspaper, which at that time would have been read by the gentry rather than the entire population, was quick to point out to the readership the responsibility of the Government to the people afflicted under the blight:

A heavy responsibility rest upon the government at the present crisis, nothing less than the procuring of subsistence for numbers of our starving fellow countrymen, and should any unnecessary delay intervene most dreadful must be the consequences.

They recognise that they will have to take some part in the relief of the people:

We do not however require its gratuitous distribution; let food be provided at a reasonable rate and let employment be given to enable the people to purchase but let it be done speedily and the only practical means shall have been adopted to meet the emergency.<sup>14</sup>

In April a report was made about the destitution in

what was described as "this once very prosperous and flourishing town", Mountmellick. The report says that the farmers in the area are busy at outdoor work, the planting of the crops and on the railway:

They have suffered in the few months with the weather being too wet for tillage work of any kind. This delay will mean that the crops will be late even if they are good. The weather being now favourable a great deal is doing and field labour is very general which will continue so till the spring work is finished.<sup>15</sup>

The problem lay in the fact that the town was principally a manufacturing one including the surrounding district. Great numbers engaged in the wool trade both in combing and weaving; they were tradesmen, unaccustomed to other kind of labour and in fact both unable and unfitted to perform labouring works out of doors. Woollen manufacture was very much depressed and where 300 men had previously been employed as combers not one was working at that time. It is calculated that at least a thousand human beings were in want in Mountmellick owing to the depressed state in the wool trade alone.

The town of Mountmellick was badly hit in the famine years due to the combined potato blight and the depressed state of the industries there. The writer suggests that works of drainage and perhaps saving of turf could be done in the district; since the workhouse could not provide outdoor relief the onus was upon the local landlords. In other words it became the responsibility of the relief committees to provide work and food in the area and throughout the county. The newspaper reports

that by the end of the year many of the most populated towns had soup kitchens but that in many areas a lot of work had yet to be done in the relief of distress. The correspondence between the relief committees and the Commission in Dublin tells us a lot about the nature of the work done throughout the county and the response of those wealthy enough to make subscriptions. This correspondence is divided into baronies so that it is easy to see which areas in the county were most in need of aid and those where the best response from the gentry occurred.

As early as March 1846 the Rev. James Lancaster, a curate of Abbeyleix, wrote to the Commission requesting Indian corn to sell to the poor of the neighbourhood.<sup>16</sup> On the 23rd of the month Inspector George Hill wrote to the Inspector General of the Constabulary to report severe distress in Mountmellick.<sup>17</sup> On 6th April Deputy Lieutenant, Col. Francis Dunne of Brittas, Clonaslee requested information regarding the terms and conditions for the provision of aid.<sup>18</sup> On the same day Viscount de Vesci, County Lieutenant, requested additional copies of the instructions for relief committees and the instructions for the use of Indian corn.<sup>19</sup> It is clear that the moves towards setting up relief committees began as soon as the legislation was in place and the instructions made available. The date of availability being February 1846. The report of G.A. Brooke gives us no further information about the state of the crop in the

county in 1845, neither the extent of the damage nor the dependency on the crop in various parts of the county. It is the lack of information on the dependency of the people in different areas that makes it impossible to judge which areas would be most badly affected by the potato blight. As it is, all that we can rely on are the reports of the Constabulary, the newspaper and the reports of the relief committees. The latter proves to be very valuable.

#### The Barony of Stradbally

There were four committees in this barony; they were Tullymoy/Timogue, Moyanna, Curraclone and Stradbally. The Stradbally barony was in the Poor Law Union of Athy and on 23rd January 1847 the workhouse contained 609 persons, nine more than it was originally supposed to contain. On 8th February 1846, the secretary applied to the government for relief for the "much distressed and suffering poor in their district".<sup>20</sup> The members of the relief committee say that every possible effort was made by them to collect subscriptions but owing to:

the poverty prevailing among the farmers, and several landlords being non-resident who refuse to contribute or even to answer applications, no more has been received by the committee than £110....We are therefore compelled to appeal to you and earnestly to solicit at your hands the largest grant that the Government regulation will permit you to afford.<sup>21</sup>

This letter which as you can see really begs for support is common. It seems cruel to think that the committees which were doing their best to relieve distress were put

in a position where they had to grovel for further assistance. The work of the committee, we are told, consists of purchasing:

wholemeal, Indian meal and rice which they have sold to the poor as nearly as possible to the cost price and in some cases of extreme distress given small amounts of each gratuitously, but this is now found to be totally insufficient to meet the wants of the numerous and very distressed poor of the district.<sup>22</sup>

The secretary was quick to point out the many problems involved in the relief measures. The men on the public works (seldom more than one in each family) did not earn more than 10d a day, and the farming labourers got even less. Many of these had to support as many as six, eight and in some cases ten individuals:

It is evident that such wages even with provisions at cost price would be totally insufficient to provide them with the necessary sustenance and therefore some more extended form of relief must be promptly adopted or starvation will ensue as has been the lamentable case in two of the adjoining districts. Under these circumstances the committee lay their case before you and anxiously wait the favour of your reply.<sup>23</sup>

It is becoming increasingly apparent during the famine that one of the big problems was that there were so many people dependent; large families of children were dependent on perhaps only one person who could work and provide an income and food. If the population had not increased at such a rapid rate then the provisions of relief may have been enough to curb the increase in destitution, disease and deaths. A man working on the public works could not hope to earn enough to support a

large family; he had no hope of providing the same subsistence that his potato crop had afforded him.

Timogue/Tullymoy committees report on 23rd February 1847 that:

The district is a large one extending over six to seven thousand acres of ground it is a mountainous district and the people are in a very miserable state generally speaking, and though no person is known to have died of starvation yet several have been supposed to have died of destitution, fever is gaining ground and dysentery very prevalent.<sup>24</sup>

They request Government assistance as in the country as a whole the people were in their weakened state subject to many diseases, fever, dysentery and cholera. In March they applied for two boilers able to hold from 80 to 100 gallons to prepare food for distribution. It had become necessary in order to save lives to distribute cooked food.

The Stradbally committee has managed to collect subscriptions of £123,3s,5d the sum of £25 being given by a resident landowner, Captain Fitzgerald. They have also opened a soup kitchen in the town. The relief offered is as follows:

we are now selling rice and turnips at cost price and have established a soup kitchen from which 300 persons daily receive relief. The poor people who are obliged to buy food at cost price are with very real difficulty sustained on the wages now earned and their physical decay in consequence of insufficient food is plain to every observer. To subsist a grant of money from his excellency the Lord Lieutenant is necessary as well as permission to relax the rule laid down. We understand that no measure is left to the relief committee but to sell at cost price.<sup>25</sup>

It becomes more and more obvious that the Government measures are inadequate. In Moyanna the committee have collected subscriptions of £56 but they report that, "the relief is much wanting and that the present severe weather is a great aggravation of the want of poverty that is everywhere around us".<sup>26</sup>

#### The Tinnehinch Barony

This barony was one of the worst hit during the famine years in Queen's county. There were four relief committees: Kilmanman/Rearymore, Rosenallis, Castlebrack and Mountmellick. In March 1847 the Castlebrack committee had broken the instructions given to them by the commission: "Meal is given out gratuitously in some cases; sold at cost price; the number relieved 480."<sup>27</sup> They hoped that the Government would give them a grant equal to the sum they have raised £133. The Mountmellick committee pointed out that destitution was everyday becoming greater and the potato crop was almost useless by September 1846. In consequence of this they suggested that there was a need for public works and said that in this area drainage works would be beneficial since the town had often found itself under water. The board of works had by October sent officers to inspect the possibility of these works. In Rosenallis by March 1847 the committee was giving food gratuitously to the amount of £20 per week and they were severely in debt. We will see the levels of destitution when we look at the Mountmellick union more closely. The *Leinster Express*



also gives us some clues as to the state of the relief committees. On 9th January 1847 the chairman of Mountmellick committee wrote that there were 72 men employed on the relief works on the road between Mountmellick and Portarlinton but all that they received at the end of the week was 2 1/2d each due to the miscalculations of the overseer. It was also pointed out that such was the extreme destitution in Mountmellick that the bread for the workhouse had to escorted by fixed bayonets.<sup>28</sup> Mr Adair also suggests that the committee resign as they are not in a position to provide relief for those requesting it. On 30th January it was further reported that:

the members of the committee are indefatigable in their exertions. They afford weekly relief in Indian meal, gratuitously, to 430 families, consisting of 2,036 individuals. This is independent of good beef soup, 150 gallons of which are sold at one penny a quart weekly with the addition of a quarter of a pound of bread to each recipient. This committee are making preparations on an extensive scale which will enable them to distribute weekly one thousand quarts of soup at one penny per quart.<sup>29</sup>

#### Barony of Clandonagh

This barony had four committees; they were Kyle/Aghaboe, Donaghmore, Rathdowney and Borris-in-Ossory. Rathdowney was in the union of Roscrea which on 30th January had 929 persons; it was built to accommodate 700. In Kyle a soup kitchen supplied the people gratuitously with meal. In February 1847 the secretary, Mr Harry White, pleaded for aid, "I implore you give no delay as the people are in an awful condition both from

hunger and fever".<sup>30</sup> The commissioners noted that the Kyle committee was acting in opposition to the Borris-in-Ossory committee which was regularly given grants by the Lord Lieutenant. The Kyle committee had not produced a receipt for their subscriptions and they did so only in March 1847. All in all the relief works in this barony were sketchy. The Borris-in-Ossory committee collected £332,6s,d. They distributed meal by the end of 1846. It is interesting to note that a member of the committee wrote to enquire about the salary available to the secretary. The reply stated that there was no firm salary as the duties varied according to the distress in the district. The amount was left to the discretion of the committee and had to come from the relief funds, there being no other available source.<sup>31</sup> Since they were supposed to work on a voluntary basis it is likely that most secretaries did not get paid, especially if distress was acute. This barony may not have been as badly hit as others since the secretary was prepared to request a salary.

#### The Upperwoods Barony

The Upperwoods Barony had one relief committee and following the instructions of the commission set up their own relief works. In November 1846 the committee resolved that they:

now feel it their imperative duty to call for further employment within the district there being on these lists 609 district families of which 192 families consist of five members and upwards of these last the committee find it will be absolutely necessary to provide

immediate employment for 192 and now earnestly call on the those who have the authority to do so at once to comply with this request.<sup>32</sup>

It seems that the most accute problem in November was the weather which impeded the relief works. The committee requested that, though the men had to stop work they should still be given a minimum rate of pay. A detailed account of the work in the barony is given. They give the list of workmen and the number of destitute in the district so that future works would be organised where they were required and that as works finished others would succeed them.<sup>33</sup>

<u>No.</u>	<u>Name/description.</u>	<u>No. workmen.</u>	<u>No. destitute in district.</u>
1.	Hills on Rd. from Abbeyleix to Borris in Ossory.	30	46
2.	Fill gaps from bridge at Sawyers bounds to Sallybrook lodge.	24	40
3.	Cut hill at Gash.	34	43
4.	Cahir Rd.,	80	156
5.	Nealstown Rd.,	100	101
6.	Cappanara Rd.,	40	77
7.	Cranagh Rd.,	80	164
8.	Drim Rd.,	100	145
9.	Lacka Hill.	<u>24</u>	<u>27</u>
	<b>Total</b>	<b><u>512</u></b>	<b><u>799</u></b>

### The Maryborough Barony

The first reports from this Barony came in December 1846, when the committee brought to the attention of the commission the unprecedented distress in the neighbourhood: "I have ascertained that there are this day 300 men actually starving and nearly 500 women and children depending on them."<sup>34</sup> The purpose of the letter was to gain immediate relief work if possible but also relief while the work was in progress. In March 1847 the two committees in the barony were united so they could as a whole attend to the relief of the poor in the Electoral division of Raheen. They also took the decision to substitute soup and bread with stirabout and that weekly subscriptions should be collected if possible.<sup>35</sup>

### The Portnahinch Barony

The town of Portarlington had a soup kitchen and there was also a relief committee in Lea/Coolbanagher. On 17th December 1846 the relief committee asked for a grant from the Government. The reply was not favourable giving strict conditions for the distribution of relief:

A donation shall be added by government and may be applied toward the gratuitous relief of the actually infirm poor when destitute and when the workhouse of the union is full but not otherwise and that gratuitous relief cannot be given to any other class in any other form, whether by supplying provisions under market price or affording other kinds of gratuitous aid.<sup>36</sup>

By March of 1847 they had managed to raise £320 in subscriptions.

### Maryborough West Barony

The town of Mountrath had a soup kitchen and there were two committees, Maryborough West and Mountrath. The district was for the most part unreclaimed bog and mountain moor. The people were in an extreme state of poverty and destitution and this was due particularly to the absence of landlords. The landlords of the district were non-resident and the principle land owner, Lord Merrington, had not answered an application for funds, much less donated to the fund. They adopted the following rules for the distribution of relief: First that families with five persons and with one able for work were to be given a ticket to purchase Indian meal at cost price; Families with more than five individuals with only one able to work were to be given a quarter stone of Indian meal. This was to be the same for families completely destitute with no one able to work. Due to the fact that in February of 1847 there were 854 people in the workhouse in Abbeyleix the Mountrath committee found that it was necessary to apply to the Government for a liberal grant for what they called a "wretchedly poor locality". The grant was not readily forthcoming and in March another letter was sent to say that if it did not soon arrive relief would have to cease since they had managed to raise only the sum of £313,18s,9d.<sup>37</sup>

### The Ballyadams Barony

On 23rd May 1846 the relief committee of Ballyadams sent a list of resolutions to the central commission:

Distress prevails among small farmers and labourers. Distress is particularly felt in the Mountain district when upwards of 300 have been deprived of employment by the suspension of the colliery where the potato crop has totally failed.<sup>38</sup>

They go on to say that upwards of 2,500 persons are in need of relief. The list of subscriptions came to £371 which for such an amount of people was quite inadequate and they request a donation. A report by the inspecting officer of the district, P.M.Kee, is interesting for what it reveals about the nationwide policy of non-interference with trade and how the people were suffering unnecessarily because of it:

I feel it is my duty to report for the information of the commissioners of the board of public works, that it is my conviction that the destitution in this country is increasing rapidly and that unless some diminution takes place in the price of meal the relief afforded by employment will be quite inadequate to enable the labouring classes to support their families. The turnip crop has hitherto afforded a partial subsistence; it is rapidly decreasing and like every other means of support has increased in price.<sup>39</sup>

The consequence of this and other policies was the death of many people. In February 1847 the committee wrote to say that in the district there had been 27 deaths from starvation and that disease and death were frightfully on the increase. They had asked for a subscription equivalent to that received in subscriptions: £338. This district it seems was particularly hard hit due to the collapse of the coal mining in the area before the famine.

### The Maryborough East Barony

On 9th November 1846 the Maryborough committee wrote to the commission in the hope that:

the most early and active steps shall be taken for the employment and relief of the suffering poor in this district. The committee have to express their disappointment at not having the advantage of the attendance of any officer on behalf of the Government or board of works and consequently they are unable to take any steps for proceeding with public works or for affording relief to the poor.<sup>40</sup>

The town, it seems, had three committees, one of which had been authorised by the lord lieutenant of the country. The other two acted independently, one for the distribution of meal at reduced prices, the other for a soup kitchen. The attempt to unite them was made and was successful. This meant that the united subscription fund had a better chance of being equalled by a Government grant. On 10th February 1847 they resolved to give relief in the medium of cooked food. They resolved upon establishing cooking kitchens. The hope was to place these kitchens in different parts of the electoral district and to provide the destitute with the best possible relief. The committee requested that they be sent an ordinance map of the division in order to define subdistricts and the best place to put the kitchens.<sup>41</sup>

### The Slievemarque Barony

The troubles associated with the high food prices become apparent in a letter from the Ballickmoyler relief committee. They wrote:

sheep stealing and larcenies of all kinds have very much increased and many of those employed

in the public works particularly in the colliery district give expression to their intentions stating that they will not much longer submit to starvation. The price of provisions is so very high and the wages which they are able to earn being quite insufficient to supply their wants and those of their families who appear in the greatest distress and to which there are few able to earn any wages whatever since the frost set in and should it continue, I really do not know how they are to exist nor what unforeseen steps they may take to procure food."42

This district covered a large area of the collieries with 848 families and 4,159 people in great distress. The committee sold whole meal at below cost price but wages earned can only afford a limited supply of food. There had been up to this point 80 deaths from dysentery, diarrhoea and cholera and the Newtown dispensary was regularly treating over 100 people. The Rev.E.Kelly, of the Clonbrock committee wrote in January 1847. He said that mortality had exceeded by three times that of any former year during that season:

the suffering of the wives and children of the labouring classes is truly appalling; the labourers being obliged to support their strength in order to sustain their daily toil are very nearly able to consume in food the amount of their earnings and the mere trifle that is over is barely able to support existence in his wife and children.43

He said that up to this point the poor had been able to pawn or sell what little that they had but this was no longer the case; there were 3,000 individuals suffering hunger in the parish and, beyond all doubt, hundreds would die of starvation if not rescued. His request was fervent:

I implore for God's sake that means may be



taken by those who have the power to check the progress of famine here as I am completely beggared and have no further means at my disposal and every other person in this poor and backward district who could give has done so publicly and privately to an incredibly large amount with one or two exceptions.<sup>44</sup>

#### The Clarmalagh Barony

This barony had three committees in Ballacolla, Durrow and Aughmecart. On 27th July 1847 there were 1,155 persons in the Abbeyleix workhouse which had been built for 500. The Ballacolla committee sent a letter with the following resolutions. It was:

resolved that in this locality in which 3,560 are in an alarming state of destitution and so unfavoured with local resources no amount of local aid can be expected commensurate with the necessities of the poor or sufficient to prevent the horrors of extensive starvation.<sup>45</sup>

The Durrow committee supplied Indian meal and also public works but unfortunately by February of 1847 these works were nearly completed and 50 or 60 families were out of work. Half the population of the district was on the poor list. This group held one tenth of the land and with the exception of a small portion it was, for the following season, uncropped. To continue at the same level of relief (12lb of meal for adults and 6lb for children) would have cost some £150 per week at the present price which is consistently rising. By March of 1847 the Aughmecart committee reported the extension of relief to families on the public works who had to support more than four persons. They praised the local farmers who they said acted in a liberal fashion in the support of their destitute neighbours.<sup>46</sup>

### The Cullinagh Barony

In this barony were the Stradbally, Timahoe and Ballinakill relief committees. The district was under distress with no resident proprietors. The diseases of dysentery and fever prevailed and the poorhouse was full. The Ballinakill committee reported that there were some 2,000 in the mountain district with no resident gentry. This being rather a peculiar circumstance in which to find themselves they expected the Government to make a liberal grant. They stated that their intention was to buy meal and sell it at half price to the helpless persons in order to avoid the calamity of death by starvation. They intended to buy rice also which would combat dysentery. They requested in Ballinakill boilers for a soup kitchen where they would provide food daily for hundreds of destitute. By March of 1847 they had provided 1,156 persons with relief and no one had yet died of starvation but disease was on the increase. In Abbeyleix there were 4,627 on the books and it appears that the relief committee were providing public works to 432. In Ballyroan there was a soup kitchen by October of 1846 with some 280 persons at this time in need of assistance.<sup>47</sup>

### Early Relief Measures

The relief measures in the early years of the famine were of varying effectiveness. The measures first of all were subject to the condition within a certain area since they were divided by barony and then into



smaller relief committees. If the barony was a wealthy one where the landholders gave generous and sufficient relief then the poor could be hopeful that they would not die of starvation. There were some baronies where there were few proprietors and as a result the relief committees were entirely at the mercy of the Government and whatever relief their grant of money would stretch to. The different areas also suffered due to the level of population and the numbers of poor. This is most obvious in any of the baronies which had districts where the collieries had operated before the famine; they found themselves plunged into extreme destitution.

The relief committees, being run on a voluntary basis, were bound to be of varying effectiveness. No doubt some committees stuck rigidly to the rules of the commission to the detriment of the local people. Others were prepared to take risks to sell food at lower prices or to give it gratuitously as they saw the need. The relief works were most inappropriately named as one member of a relief committee pointed out. Men were earning small sums and due to high food prices were unable to buy adequate supplies. Since they needed nourishment in order to keep up such hard manual labour many found that they succumbed to disease working in all conditions. The families were at the mercy of the seasons; bad weather could close the works for days or weeks and at intervals where no work was being done they had no income or support. The people who worked on the

public works were often farmers; their absence from the field meant that crops for the next season often went unplanted with disastrous consequences. The relief committees, as with all human endeavour, were subject to the inadequacies of individuals who made mistakes, did not work hard enough or did not recognise the correct measures that should be taken in certain circumstances. The soup kitchens when in full operation saved many from starvation but the Government in the autumn of 1847 decided to change the direction of the relief measures to the poor law. It seems in general that the response in the county was swift except in areas without resident gentry. The letters indicate the reliance on the benevolence of the Government in each case. The secretaries appeal to them time and again with the description of their work and their efforts and the necessity for more money in order to relieve distress which they often describe in detail.

#### Quaker or the Society of Friends Relief

One voluntary organisation which became involved in the relief of famine distress in 1846 when a complete failure of the potato crop occurred was the Society of Friends. They saw it as their duty to become involved on relief of distress. A central relief committee was established whose aim was to raise funds for distribution and to gather information regarding the nature of the problem in different areas. The three provinces of

Leinster, Ulster and Munster were to be given relief but Connaught was excluded since there were too few members in the west. Ironically it was there that the help was most needed.

Their first option, outlined in an address, was to provide soup kitchens in towns and other densely inhabited places in order to provide a cheap and nutritious diet. Grants would be made available to local relief committees and trustworthy individuals subject to necessary vetting. A group of twelve members subdivided into groups of four took responsibility for the provision of relief in each of the provinces. The purpose of the committees was to channel the aid from those who were offering it to those who were seeking it. The raising of funds was a crucial part of their work. By May 1847 £4,800 had been collected from Irish Quakers while £35,500 was collected from English Friends and some £4,000 from non-Friends. They decided that the best way to distribute relief was to get local residents to become involved in its distribution. Applicants for a grant had to fill in a questionnaire. They had to indicate the location involved, the numbers in distress, the number of able bodied labourers, the presence of fisheries, the amount of planting taking place, the price of food locally and the presence of soup kitchens. The relief was usually in the form of food rather than money and this was sometimes a problem since the Government policy was not to provide cheaper food which would

undercut local traders. To overcome this it was decided to concentrate on commodities which were not normally available locally so that there was no local trade to undermine. Rice was distributed in large quantities for this reason and also because it did not lead to the dysentery which was the result of other foods.<sup>48</sup>

The distribution of food, clothes and money during the famine had been at its most successful in the winter of 1846-47. As the famine progressed, however, this highly intense form of relief began to take its toll on the resources and energies of those involved in the Quaker committees. The committee members had become involved in a project which they felt would last for about ten months or so but they found themselves involved for almost four years. Queen's county received a lot of relief from the committee in that time. It can be divided as follows: food 45 tons, money £65, boilers 4, seeds 220 lbs, and clothing 45 grants. This can be further divided in the baronies of the county.<sup>49</sup>

**Portnahinch:** The parishes to receive help were part of Mountmellick and Portarlinton. They received £25, seven sacks of meal and a 1/2 ton of rice between 10th February and 10th May 1847.<sup>50</sup>

**Tinnehinch:** From 1st February to 26th July 1847 the parishes of Mountmellick, Rearymore and Reary collectively received £75, five tons of rice and seven tons of Indian meal. Some of the applicants looked for employment relief which was given in the form of food.<sup>51</sup>

**Stradbally:** Tullymoy, Timogue, Moyanna, Emo and Curraclone received from 20th February to 24th June 1847 the following: six tons of rice, £25 and two tons of Indian meal.<sup>52</sup>

**Maryborough East:** The parishes of Dysart and Maryborough from March to June 1847 got one ton of rice and £25.<sup>53</sup>

**Maryborough West:** Mountrath, Raheen, Ballyfin applied to set up soup shops and for other relief; they received £90,7s,4d, four and a half tons of rice, a boiler, three tons of meal and six sacks of meal. This was all received from February to July of 1847.<sup>54</sup>

**Ballyadams:** In the parish of Ballintuber they received one ton of rice, a half ton of meal and £25 from February to July of 1847.<sup>55</sup>

**Slievemargue:** In Ballickmoyler, Killeshin and Cooper's Hill the amount of aid was as follows two tons of rice, three tons of meal, three sacks of meal and £35 from March to May 1847.<sup>56</sup>

**Cullinagh:** The places relieved were Ballyroan, Ballinakill and Abbeyleix and their requests varied from setting up soup shops to relief requests. They received 8.2 tons of rice, two boilers, three tons of meal and £84,4s,0d. Some relief was given to the parochial school in Ballyroan. All this occurred between February to May 1847.<sup>57</sup>

**Upperwoods:** It is interesting to note the mention of the Castletown relief committee in the *Leinster Express* in February of 1847:

The devotion, humanity and generosity of the contributors towards this fund are beyond all praise and we are happy to learn that their exertions have been so highly appreciated by the relief committee of the Society of Friends, that the latter have rendered their most substantial aid in cash and clothing, stating at the same time that 'this grant considerably exceeds what we are accustomed to make at a first application and it is to be considered by the poor relief committee of Castletown as a mark of our approbation of their admirable system of administration accounts of which assured us that the funds entrusted to them will be carefully husbanded and judiciously distributed'.<sup>58</sup>

The relief of the society was as follows: to the Castletown committee, £50 on 3rd February. The other aid was to Offerlane, Ashbrook and Brookfield. They received £25, two tons of rice, five tons of meal and five barrels of meal.<sup>59</sup>

**Clandonagh:** The parishes of Kyle, Donaghmore, Rathdowney and Borris-in-Ossory received £83, four tons of rice, four tons of meal and a half ton of oatmeal.<sup>60</sup>

**Clarmallagh:** In Ballacolla, Durrow and Abbeyleix the society gave £50, three tons of rice, two tons of Indian meal and one boiler.<sup>61</sup>

This is the record of the aid given by the Society of Friends but it does not include the amount of seed or clothing given. The society received many letters from relief committees requesting help like this from the priest in Rathdowney. It seems that many of the clergy were involved in the relief committees and from letters were vocal in their attempts to gain assistance. The following letter was written on 20th January 1847:

in the hope that you will be kind enough to



assist in the effort now being made to supply the necessities of the poor in this locality with which you are connected and where the distress is so urgent and extensive that it can only be effectively alleviated by prompt and liberal contributions.<sup>62</sup>

The committee sent to all the relief committees a recipe for Barley soup which was: 2 gallons of water, 3/4 lb of oatmeal, 1/4 lb of barley, 2lbs of turnips and carrots (grated), 4lbs of turnips & cabbages cut in small pieces and leeks or an onion all to be boiled for 3 hours and oatmeal added; they recommended that peameal was better than oatmeal. The society received many letters giving thanks for their help. The Maryborough Relief committee sent "heartfelt thanks for their attention to his application for the relief committee of Maryborough and the magnificent donation of a ton of rice".<sup>63</sup> In December of 1848 the following letter was sent from Susan Cooper, wife of a local land owner. She wrote:

Thank you for a grant of clothing I wish I could say our prospect for this winter was cheery but I am afraid the poor people have as much to go through as in past years. They cannot but feel thankful and grateful to your committee for the relief so often offered to them.<sup>64</sup>

The following reply from a committee is indicative of the society's efforts to find out the state of the country. It was sent by the Borris-in-Ossory committee on 2nd February 1847. They point out that there is not the least exaggeration in the reply:

Most of the old and infirm are already dead being deprived of the few comforts hitherto afforded to them by the few spare pence in the family which must now be spent in providing coarse food for the whole. The people are

demoralized on the miscalled relief works; they are hardly to be recognized by those who knew them some months since and they have ceased to attend in the least to personal cleanliness.<sup>65</sup>

The toll of the famine and the ineffective relief measures took effect in the deaths, first of the old and weak, and then from starvation and disease, those on the public works and their families.

The society was involved in the relief of a group of children in a school in Mountrath. The average weekly attendance was 210, with an average daily attendance of 35. The children attended for six days of the week. The expense of the relief was £1 a week and the children received a breakfast of Indian meal and rice 2:1 with treacle added.<sup>66</sup> At first glance it is clear that the society gave a lot of aid to the relief committees and in some cases to individuals in the county to help their relief work one such person being, Susan Cooper. The letters of the committees indicate the positive attitude they had to the Society and the joy with which they received much needed relief. The letters certainly give a picture of relationships of ease as opposed to those written to the relief commission in Dublin in which the committees are often forced to plead for assistance. The Quaker population, through their efforts to provide relief and also the general economic difficulties in the country, often found that they too suffered due to the famine. In Queen's county there was a large Quaker population. The Quaker businesses suffered severely. One example in the town of Mountmellick was Joseph Bale,

a manufacturer of woolens and cotton who also had a corn mill. The economic slump caused by the famine ruined his textile business while the corn mill could operate only sporadically when grain was available. By the end of the famine he was financially ruined and his family had emigrated to Australia. There was a school in Mountmellick which provided education for the children of Quakers living in Leinster. This school was almost forced to close due to the effects of the famine on its own potato crop.<sup>67</sup>

The biggest gap in the records of the relief committees concerns the relief works which they put into operation, many of which came about through grants from the Office of Public Works. There are a few references in the relief correspondence to public works. One letter is particularly notable since it is the only source from one of those directly afflicted by the famine in all the records for the county. The letter is sincere and emotional and it can be noted that the hand writing was shaky but neat and clear:

*Ballymaddock near Abbeyleix*

*"To the honourable the poor relief commissioners of Ireland, Dublin.*

*Honourable Sirs,*

*It is with feelings of pain and pleasure that I presume to address the following distressing communication to you from one of about 200 hungry persons who assembled in this town on yesterday on the understanding that there was to be a meeting of the magistrates and cess payers of the Barony of Cullinagh in the court house there for the purpose of forwarding some of the too long promised public works but who with the exception of Lord de Vesce and Mr. Ferguson P.P. did not attend. They declined to act for the want of more members consequently we were obliged to return home*

without the least encouragement with hungry bodies and hungry families. If you or either of your honourable commissioners were to witness our proceedings and appearance your hearts would be hard indeed if not moved to compassion in our case hungry yet peaceable and forbearing. While I am on this part of the subject I may well say that report has it that government is about to give provisions of meal into the hands of the police to be retailed at a moderate price. If even that itself was done in time if it has no other effect it will have this of keeping down the price which has risen to such an alarming height these three last markets in town.

I said pleasure as well as pain, in hopes that this latter article may be sent amongst us even for payment in time it will be considered a boon to save us further in hopes that his excellency in whose power we presume it is and on whose humanity at this crisis we have the greatest confidence may order the public works so long and inexcusably delayed by persons for purposes I can't at this time say. The only excuse on yesterday was that they could not go on for the want of form. In the meantime we and our families starving and willing to work if it could be had, if your honourable commission in its humane intentions does not immediately take our case into your favourable considerations we won't be able to work when we get it, do send us in time your oats and Indian meal it will do so much good which is I am sure your honourable intentions.

Signed on behalf of himself & suffering poor  
Richard Power,  
Queen's County."68

Letters regarding the commencement of relief works in a couple of baronies are part of the relief commission records. On 11th June 1846 Richard Pennefather authorised the amount of £2,800 for the commencement of certain road works in the barony of Slievemargue at an estimated cost of £2,800. He stated that: "an urgent necessity exists for immediate employment in that district".<sup>69</sup> The Ballyadams committee wrote to the commission to enquire if white-washing was a suitable public work; they saw it as a measure against disease to white wash houses and hovels. They also asked about the work of knitting and plaiting straw for females and boys

of which the committee could sell and employ hundreds. The commission approve of both these suggestions and do not see them as violation of the printed instructions.<sup>70</sup>

A letter from Francis P. Dunne for the Tinnehinch relief committee on the 19th June 1847 about the relief works states that:

it would be a great advantage to a poor and populous place and would enable the relief committee to direct their efforts more effectually to districts in which it was impossible to recommend public works.<sup>71</sup>

A letter from the Office of Public Works to the relief commission on 29th June 1846 gives approval to a public work with a grant of £200.<sup>72</sup> The records of the Office of Public works give us some indication of the work done in the county but not in much detail. What we have is an indication of the level of work but not the variety of work. The county being land-locked did not allow for piers to be built as happened in many other counties; neither were there large scale drainage works. However one drainage work worth noting was that in Borris-in-Ossory of the river Nore and the sum of £2,000 was given for the purpose. The 16th annual report of the Office of Public Works describes the effect of the work on the district:

Along the portion of the district which has been freed from floods not only has security been given to the crops ..... I regret to state that as yet little or no effort has been made by the occupiers to avail themselves of the facilities our works afford for thorough drainage.

The works done in the county were generally road works,

whether building or repair and a number of grants were given for this kind of work which began specifically as a response to distress.

The following is a list of loans up to January 1847 in aid of the construction of certain works most likely to be roads.<sup>73</sup>

<b>Barony</b>	<b>Amount</b>
Tinnehinch	£225
Ballyadams	£370
Clarmallagh	£ 75
Upperwoods	£130
Cullenagh	£250
Clondonagh	£ 30
Ballyadams	£1,315
Maryborough West	£1,874
Upperwoods	£2,565
Ballyadams	£370
Clondonagh	£ 30
Clarmallagh	£500
Clarmallagh	£ 75
Cullenagh	£650
Cullenagh	£250
Tinnehinch	£225
Tinnehinch	£100
Upperwoods	£130

Grants did not necessarily come in lump sums they were given bit by bit as the committees showed the need for further works in the area.

The relief works of the Office of Public Works officially ended in the middle of July 1847 and the people left on the relief works were those doing essential tasks. The sixteenth annual report of the Office of Public Works shows that at the end of the relief works the county was in every barony in debt to the commissioners of public works. This is a statement of the loans that were made to the county.<sup>74</sup>

Barony	Loan	£	s	d
Ballyadams	1,790,	1,	5	
Clandonagh	2,763,	0,	6	
Clarmallagh	2,518,	15,	6	
Cullenagh	3,820,	15,	6	
Maryborough East	2,061,	17,	8	
Maryborough West	2,713,	1,	0	
Portnahinch	1,252,	7,	0	
Slievemargue	2,817,	1,	8	
Stradbally	447,	0,	8	
Tinnehinch	4,507,	6,	2	
Upperwoods	1,201,	5,	0	
	<u>25,892,</u>	<u>12,</u>	<u>1</u>	

The grand juries were given ten years to pay back the loans in twenty half yearly instalments. An Act, which provided the grand juries with the power to call extraordinary sessions was passed on 15th May 1846. In these sessions they were provided with the power to make presentment for county works and to provide the funds for the execution of such works. The county of Queen's received large sums for the provision of relief works from the Board of Public Works lists of the grants appear in the annual reports. Two of the baronies, Tinnehinch and Cullenagh seem to have provided a lot of works. But the records leave the nature of the works in the county a mystery.

The public works which mostly consisted of roads were not the only kind of work that was carried out in the county. The Public Work Act of 1846 was supplemented by another provision which was to give employment of a more specialised nature. This work was embodied in 'Mr Labouchere's Letter' of 5th October 1846. The Letter from the Chief Secretary of Ireland provided for drainage

and subsoiling to be added to the list of public works. The funding for these works was under the Poor Law rating and this was a measure to encourage landlords to provide relief works while simultaneously undertaking lasting improvements on their estates.<sup>75</sup> An interesting connection with the county occurs here. The land agent, William Steuart Trench, was involved in setting up the system of drainage that was undertaken in the Labouchere works. Trench aware of the public outcry against the road relief works realised there was a demand for useful and productive employment so he set about drawing up a plan for such work:

I drew up a complete system, embracing plans, specifications, . . . . for draining, subsoiling, reclaiming, and the like. I then went to Dublin, laid the whole project before the Board of Public Works.<sup>76</sup>

His proposal was accepted and he was given a salary of £500 plus expenses. In the Barony of Farney he set up the system to test its workability and these provisions were afterwards "adopted and carried out under the provisions known as 'Mr Labouchere's Letter'".<sup>77</sup> He sent the details of the whole system printed to Dublin and he returned to Queen's county, "over almost the whole of which I had especial charge so far as those works were concerned, and I spent the next two years superintending the execution of drainage and other improvements".<sup>78</sup> So many loans were given for land improvement by the Board of public Works to the land owners in the county that it would be impossible to give details of them all; suffice



to say that the provision of land improvement must have given employment to many more people and saved many from the fate of death by starvation.

The direction of the Government's relief measures changed in February 1847 when it announced its new policy. It was a move away from the relief committees and the public works; the repayments on loans made to local authorities for the public works were remitted by half. The Government chose to have soup kitchens and to allow outdoor relief from the workhouses. These new measures were to be financed by the Poor Law unions. The unions were supported by local taxes and the tax payers, land owners and those with large tenures who had already been subscribers to the relief committees were again called upon to pay for the relief measures. It is this change over to the Poor Law and its consequences for the rate payers as well as the nature of the relief in the later years of the famine which I will examine in Chapter Three.

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34. ibid. Ref comm. Maryborough Barony.
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## Chapter Three

### The Mountmellick Union

The unmitigated failure of the relief works and soup kitchens in the relief of the famine victims had by 1848 meant that the Government was relying on the Poor Law for the relief of distress. What was the Poor Law and when was it established in Ireland?. The early 1830s saw a strong campaign in Ireland and Britain for the introduction of a measure of poor relief in Ireland. Previously all relief had been on a purely voluntary basis given by the wealthy citizens, essentially the landed classes. Any Poor Law would rely on their money but in an organised fashion. Irish property was to pay for Irish poverty.

The reasons given for introducing such a law were many, from the inevitable consequence of civilization to the necessity of increasing prosperity in the country. Since the Act of Union of 1801 it seemed that the country was progressing in prosperity. This prosperity was unfortunately confined to the landed gentry, farmers, merchants, traders and shopkeepers. While the mass of peasants were still "miserable". One contemporary writer, R.Montgomery Martin talked about the need for capital investment in Ireland which should go side by side with a poor law:

I think therefore it is the duty of the legislature to open wider the prospect of usefully employing capital in Ireland, to give greater facilities and encouragement to the investments to men to settle in that country by preparing them a quiet and well ordered population.<sup>1</sup>

His arguments and others lead to the introduction of the Poor Law to Ireland.

Unfortunately some of the benefits which could have come to all classes with a poor law did not happen. The Whately Commission which had begun its work in 1832 developed a plan which aimed to take Ireland out of the cycle of poverty in which labourers had become more and more dependant on the potato and in which there were few options for employment except on the land. Richard Whately, Chairman of the Commission and Church of Ireland archbishop of Dublin had devised a poor law which aimed to set up agricultural schools, a board of works and assistance to emigrate, as well as institutions where people could get assistance. Deterring pauperism, however, was a more appealing plan for the British cabinet, which sent George Nicholls, a commissioner of the English Poor Law, to Ireland to find an alternative; that was what he did. He wanted to extend the English Poor Law which ran on the principles of utilitarianism and a minimum of intervention.<sup>2</sup>

Nicholls's plan for Ireland was not one aimed at meeting the needs of the poor but rather at protecting the rest of the community from the pauper. The target of the Poor Law was to have 130 workhouses established between 1838 and 1845. There is no doubt that the system was a harsh one in many respects. An emotional picture is given by Kickham in his novel *Sally Cavanagh*:

In spite of Sally Cavanagh's pleading to be allowed to keep just the youngest little boy,



sir! It was no use, she had to comply with the rules. The children followed an official into a long corridor before the door closed behind them they turned round to take a last look at their mother and as they did so, their little hearts died within them.<sup>3</sup>

The Poor Law was officially instituted in an Act for the more effectual relief of the poor on 31st of July 1838. Section 15 states:

The commission were ordered to unite such and so many townlands as they think fit to be a union for the relief of the poor by such names the commissioners shall order direct.

For the Queen's county this meant that there was more or less a division into two halves, the two unions being Abbeyleix and Mountmellick. They were not divided strictly by county which meant that parts of Queen's belonged to Athy union and Roscrea union. The support of the unions was to be carried out in the form of the rates levied in each district. Each union was to be divided into electoral divisions for the election of guardians. Section 61 states:

Be it enacted that for the purpose of defraying the expenses incurred in the execution of this act the guardians of each union or where a board of guardians shall not be acting the persons or officers appointed by the commissioners on their behalf shall from time to time make and levy such rates as may be necessary on every occupier.

In the 1830s even proponents of the Poor Law knew that the occurrence of famine, if general, was a contingency not planned for. "Nicholls stated that his poor law was designed to facilitate the development of capitalist farming in Ireland, and that it was not meant to cover large scale catastrophe such as famine."<sup>4</sup> Yet

in the final stages of the famine it was the Poor Law which became the core of the relief of famine victims. With the failure of the relief works it was decided to extend the scope of the Poor Law. Up to this time, relief outside the workhouse was not allowed. In 1847 all this changed. A general order was made for the administration of outdoor relief. The unions to which the order referred included those in Queen's county: Abbeyleix and Mountmellick. This outdoor relief was to be given by relieving officers. They were to devote themselves entirely to the office; they were to be over 21 and able to read and write and keep accounts. Their duties were to attend the meetings of the board of guardians as directed by the guardians and to attend the places in their district for the purpose of administering relief.

Relief was not automatic; it was necessary for each applicant to be assessed by the relieving officer. The officer was to visit the home of the applicant and to make all necessary enquiries into the state of health, the ability to work, the previous earnings and other means of such applicant and to report the result of these enquiries in a prescribed form. In cases of sudden and urgent necessity then the officer was to convey the person immediately to the workhouse.<sup>5</sup> At the height of the famine it seems likely that any humane officer would have dispensed with some of the formalities and allowed those in need to receive aid more readily. The lack of

records for the officers leaves us at a loss as to the detail of their duties.

They were responsible for dispensing a weekly allowance to the poor in their district who had qualified for assistance under the regulations, whether this was food, lodgings or medicine. The commissioners showed their naivety and how far removed they were from the state of things in the country when they wrote this letter to all the unions:

the commissioners think that the evil which is to be guarded against is the necessity of granting outdoor relief to able bodied men and that the main point for the guardians to keep steadily in view, is to make their workhouses as extensively available as possible for the relief of this class.<sup>6</sup>

They continue:

During the past year indeed it has been absolutely necessary for the preservation of human life but still it is a matter of notoriety that numerous persons have had a share of the public alms who ought to have subsided on their own resources.<sup>7</sup>

It would be interesting to know what their definition of a person able to subsist on their own was. Much of the correspondence of the Poor Law commissioners reveals their attitude toward both the guardians and the poor in Ireland. They saw their role as constantly stopping the guardians from issuing unnecessary relief and the poor as being all too eager to take hand-outs. In retrospect, we can see the guardians were dealing with a system which constantly held them back and restricted the amount of relief they could give. For example, the Commission sanctioned the unions to provide extra accommodation but

would not give loans to this end. The poor were hardly in a position to take advantage of the Poor Law system with the rules and regulations which the commissioners insisted should be strictly adhered to; no person who was able to support themselves and their family would have rushed to receive the soup, indian meal, to the workhouse or the hardships of the public works. During the famine the commissioners held to the firm principles of the Poor Law. The rules regulations and discipline was strictly enforced showing their removal from the realities of poverty and destitution.

We can see the effects of this system in operation in the Mountmellick union, for which we are lucky enough to have minute books for the famine years. Ireland's social, political and geographic variations combined with differences in the composition of the board of the poor law guardians. Poor Law Unions had their own individual character. These differences were no less pronounced during the famine years.<sup>8</sup>

In Mountmellick we can see this in the increased destitution due to the decline in the towns industries. The rates that were collected locally soon became a drain on the local landowners and farmers, so much so that the union was by the end of the famine to find itself on the brink of bankruptcy. The difficulties that arose in the every-day running of the workhouse and how the guardians dealt with them are of course unique to this union while they do have many common features with other unions the

story remains to be told.

On the 3rd of January 1845 the first admissions were received in the workhouse in Mountmellick. The minutes for the guardians meetings begin on 22nd of February 1845. At this time there were 243 paupers in the house and of these 30 were sick; in the previous week three had died.<sup>9</sup> The conditions for the people in the workhouse at this time with low mortality and sickness can not really be compared with those that existed in the workhouse during the height of the famine. The house was built to hold 800 so the figures in the first year are well below its capacity. The collection of rates is at this time also successful; the rates for the previous week were £305,18s, while provisions cost £23,5s,6d, for the week. It was decided by the guardians that they should build a fever hospital. They placed an advertisement in the *Leinster Express* for a nurse at a salary of £12 per annum plus rations. They also advertised for tenders to build the hospital.

### Diet

When the potato blight first hit the country the relief was, as we have seen, provided by the relief committees so that at first the workhouses did not feel the effects of the failure, except that the diet of the house had to be changed. They found that they could no longer be supplied with potatoes suitable for consumption. The diet of the house had been bread, milk,

oatmeal and potatoes. As with the rest of the population potatoes provided a wholesome nourishment to the paupers and were cheap which was the main concern for the guardians. In 1845, on Easter Sunday, it was agreed that the dinner would be 1lb of beef for adults and a 1/2lb for children. In May they purchased dry lemons and oranges and on occasion wine and spirits appear on the provisions list though they are for medicinal purposes. In August of 1845 a letter was sent by the board to the commissioners about the poor quality of the potatoes; the reply to the board encourages them to continue with the use of potatoes since the quality can vary. On the 30th of the month the guardians agreed to advertise for a supply of potatoes for two months to be supplied in quantities which the master directs. By October, however, the board met to decide on an alternative diet to the potato which had generally been attacked by disease. The response to this was a letter from the secretary of the Poor Law Commission in Dublin on the best method of preserving the potato.<sup>10</sup>

The problem had not been resolved in January of 1846. The master placed before the board a report "showing the exact difference of expense between a bread and potatoes dinner. Bread costs £1,10s,4d, and potatoes cost £1,5s,6d, the difference being 4s,10d."<sup>11</sup>

The following report was made in March of 1846 by the master of Mountmellick workhouse:

Gentlemen,

I beg to bring to your information at the much care and precaution that was taken in getting in the last potatoes, there is fully 1/3 of them cooked not fit for use. Part of the same parcel even a fortnight ago were good but I find they are daily getting worse and now may be termed a perishable article under the circumstance you will please consider it admissible to take the 100 bushels from Mr Pim, that gentleman states he fears they will not give satisfaction.<sup>12</sup>

In response to this the board of guardians decided that it would be best to give a bread dinner:

In response to the warning against the decay of potatoes, we are of opinion it would be better to give a bread dinner of a stirabout according to circumstances on the days of the week that potatoes have been given for dinner.<sup>13</sup>

The diet remained like this until 1848 when for a brief period it is believed that the harvest would be successful. The guardians, however, were too hasty: the crop failed again and, as we will see, the union suffered its worse year in 1849.

### Education

The numbers entering the workhouse began to increase slightly at the end of 1845; in December there was an average of 308 per week. Yet the start of the famine in the district was not an issue which the guardians discussed at this time. It is interesting to note that the guardians were running a school in the house and that concerns about it appeared regularly in the early years of the union. In March of 1845 the guardians agreed that: "the school of the house be subject to the inspector of the commissioners of national education".<sup>14</sup>

The master and mistresses earned some £26,6s, and school books appear on the list of purchases for the house. In April of 1845 there was a report about the school; it was recommended that it open at 10 o'clock until 1.30pm when they were to adjourn for recreation and dinner until 6.00pm. Paupers, aged from 15 to 20 were to be able to attend school in a class for themselves.

From the 1st of April to the 1st of October provided the weather was favourable, children were to be taken out to walk, under the care of the master, for two hours: boys on Thursdays girls, on Tuesdays.<sup>15</sup> In February of 1846 Richard Mc Cormack, the school master, was brought before the board:

Schoolmaster reprimanded for his improper conduct in striking Fanny Grey and be cautioned that should he again allow his temper to get the better of him, the board will feel it their duty to dismiss him from his situation.<sup>16</sup>

This kind of incident does not occur again. It might be said that the guardians were ahead of their time in terms of educational philosophy.

The Famine does trigger some changes in the workhouse in 1846. The average weekly number in the house in 1845 was 256; by 1846 this had increased to 457. Slowly but surely the conditions in the house worsened. On October 3rd 1846 the number in the house was still only 487, well below the capacity. The records until September of 1847 are lost; we will never know how the guardians dealt with the problems as they arose in that period. It is quite



likely that a number of the guardians were in 1846 involved in the local relief measures and most certainly they were trying to cope with the loss of the potato crop on their own lands. Many landowners were involved in setting up works of improvement such as drainage, subsoiling and fencing on their estates for their cottier farmers and especially the labourers. When the public works stopped the guardians were then faced with a huge increase in destitution. On one occasion in 1846 there were only three guardians at the weekly meeting, an indication that they were needed elsewhere, most likely dealing with the crisis. In September of 1846 we can see something of the reaction of the guardians to the crisis:

That the board of guardians of the Mountmellick union beg to call the attention of the Government to the fact of destitution and starvation being at present impending over the population of this county or rather into it and that for the purpose of providing employment and food those requiring it on sure and sufficient principles we consider it absolutely necessary to call the Parliament together as speedily as possible which we humbly pray the Government to do we consider not one moment should be lost.<sup>17</sup>

This appeal was made just as Peel's temporary relief measures were set to close and the blight had reappeared for a second year, this time throughout the country. The plea comes with an air of urgency and certainly, with a genuine tone of concern for the people of the county.

In October a more lengthy submission was made by the guardians against the handling by the Government of the famine situation:

To the right Honourable Lord John Russell and her Majesty's first Lord of the treasury. The memorial of the poor law guardians of the Mountmellick union...in that of Great Britain and Ireland called Ireland most respectfully here with, that as the awful calamity where with the people of Ireland has been afflicted was a divine dispensation beyond the control of man. Was the legislation union professed to connect Great Britain and Ireland in one common fortune? Memorialist's most respectfully submit that advances made under the temporary labour relief acts by an imperial treasury to save a people co- subjects of the same crown from famine should be an Imperial debt ought not to be charged exclusively to Ireland. That while as guardians of the poor we are most anxious by all means in our power to administer relief to the destitute to declare as our unanimous and concientous conviction that in the present embarrated state of the country repayment if sought to be immediately enforced, would not only fail to be efficient but would assuredly lead to the complete destitution of the rate payer...

Memorialist's therefore most humbly hope that Ireland may be altogether released from payment of such advances or in accordance with the 7th article of the union be only charged with her own fair proportion there of, payable by moderate annual instalments from and after January 1850, otherwise the people will have to suffer for years protracted suffering scarcely less than those under which they have already been so greivously afflcted and in their endurance of what they have exhibited such resignation to the dinine will, such obedience to the law and such abstinence from outrage as must exalt their character as a people deserving of the permanant regard and sympathy of their rules.

Proposed, Mr. Chetwood,  
Seconded by Capt. Coote.18

The letter was written in September of 1847 when the house found itself swamped by the extreme destitution in the district. There were 1,036 paupers in the house on this date with 221 of them sick, 46 patients were being treated outside. Of the sick 101 were in the workhouse hospital and some 120 were in the fever hospital

originally built for only 44 patients. The cold, unfriendly building of the workhouse was suddenly a safe haven for many who otherwise would have died in destitution. The house did have its dangers, however; with overcrowding the spread of disease inside the house proved fatal to many, especially the old and infirm. On the 16th of October the guardians asked permission to rent another premises. The commissioners wrote a speedy reply to sanction the request. The problem lay in the fact that there were many people coming to the workhouse but lack of accommodation meant that no aid could be given. The board even went as far as requesting that they be allowed to give relief to able bodied persons that they considered destitute. The problem was resolved to the extent that a suitable building was agreed upon. The owner agreed to rent it for £80 for the duration of a year. This building was a store at Irishtown.<sup>19</sup>

The guardians were allowed to give outdoor relief in what became the final move by the Government to have distress paid for by local rates. This was exactly what the Mountmellick guardians had protested about. Failing their attempts to have this redressed they decided to write to the guardians with another request. Due to the increase in paupers in the house and the numbers who were receiving outdoor relief the necessity existed for:

the appointment of an efficient and intelligent officer to check and continue workhouse and hospital expansion and to check and examine the relieving officers accounts in the event of the board deciding on recommendation of the employment of such officers that they bring

under the notice of the commissioners.<sup>20</sup>

The commissioners rejected the proposal of a paid inspecting officer. The guardians were not completely disheartened and a member forwarded another proposal:

The guardians maintain that with the number of paupers in the workhouse and hospital over 1,600 paupers and the number of individuals receiving outdoor relief beyond 4,000 we are therefore of the opinion it is impossible for the board to perform the duty either as it regards the poor or the rate payers on the one hand the destitute may not receive that relief to which they are entitled by law and on the other hand there is no means of checking abuse. They request that the board of guardians be dissolved and replaced by paid guardians by which means irregularity and abuse may be prevented and really destitute relieved as sanctioned by law.<sup>21</sup>

The majority of the guardians rejected this proposal and they continue with their duties. The importance of the proposal was that it pointed to the difficulties which the guardians were having in administering the law. The surprising thing is that even as the crisis worsened the Government continued to leave the job of relief in the hands of volunteers, albeit very dedicated and hard working ones.

#### Workhouse Numbers

The figures for the early months of 1847 are missing but from September 1847 we have the records of admissions to the house every week. In September there were 1,036 people in the house and this number continued to rise until December, when the figure was 1,457. The numbers of sick also increased in December; there were 311 sick

with 45 external patients. The food being purchased came to 2,800 4lb loaves of bread, 800 gallons of milk, 1,000 lbs of beef, 2 dozen bottles of wine, 2 gallons of spirits (for medicinal purposes) and 10 dozen eggs. Certainly it does not seem all that bad until we consider that this food had to last one week between 1,457 people. Having taken into account the sickness and mortality in the house the guardians decided to appoint an assistant master to take charge of the additional buildings of the workhouse which was to have 500 paupers and a resident apothecary to assist the medical officer. By the beginning of 1848 the burial ground had become inadequate and the guardians had to look for a suitable cemetery. The report goes as follows:

the master begs to report that the last fortnight he has been obliged to bury the deceased paupers in the workhouse premises at the south side of the fever hospital. He hopes the board will take the utmost speedy steps to obtain the consent of Sir Charles Coote proprietor of the land laid out for a cemetery which is a most desirable place and that the commission sanction the request.<sup>22</sup>

The grave-yard was eventually approved and was in Derryguile just outside the town.

The Poor Law commissioners raised the question of coffins for the destitute. They sanctioned the purchase of coffins for paupers in extreme cases. The commissioners were asked by the board to allow the relieving officers to give coffins to poor strangers, the destitute or to people without friends to buy them a coffin. We can see the inadequacy of the relief measures

in retrospect quite clearly. When we consider that each action of the guardians was in reaction to some problem that they had not anticipated then it seems that they did a good job relative to the funds and support that was available to them.

#### Problems for the Guardians

However, things did not always run smoothly for the guardians. They were accused of burying people together in coffins. Their response to this was that it had happened but only in the following cases: two children had died together and on the request of their father they were placed in the same coffin; in another instance a mother and child were buried together. Further allegations were made about the lack of soap and water; the response was that since there was an allowance of soap and a pump in the yard, in order to defend themselves the response was that "there can be no lack of water both of which elements of cleanliness seem to be abundantly used in the opinion of the medical officer and assistant master".<sup>23</sup> We can never know what the conditions were really like. The master and medical officer were bound to defend their position and the guardians were happy to hear that all was well in the house. The amount of people sick, however, will tell us something of the lack of hygiene in the house. The house was, without a doubt being run with limited funds under extenuating circumstances never provided for by the Poor Law.

## Emigration

It was the policy of the workhouses to help people to emigrate. This continued especially during the famine years. Emigration will account for some of the people who left the workhouse each week. They did not return to better situations outside; no doubt many of them left the country or tried to. The 1847 Poor Law Amendment Act increased the powers of the guardians to assist poor persons to emigrate, notably smallholders who may have been receiving out-door relief. If the person was resident on land valued up to £5 and they gave up this land then they would be given assistance to emigrate. Inside the workhouse able-bodied females were considered to be the most suitable candidates. The commission warned that their virtue should be strictly guarded both during the journey and upon arrival.

The first instance recorded of helping a group to emigrate comes in 1848. Their destination was America and they were adult males and females. There is no record of the number who emigrated on this occasion. The guardians, it would appear, were in favour of such a scheme:

that a good system of emigration under the care and on the responsibility of Government we think well calculated to better the condition of those poor persons who may be fortunate enough to be selected and that being our opinion we have no hesitation in strongly recommending the adoption of such.<sup>24</sup>

In April of 1847 The *Leinster Express* reported on the people who were emigrating. Its report seems to point to

a different class of emigrant and certainly they were leaving in large numbers:

The numbers emigrating this season are almost incredible and it is evident their object is to flee from the misfortunes which threaten this country, while yet their means are not seriously impaired and while sufficient capital is left to enable them to seek a more remunerative investment for it and for their labour.....Those people are leaving Ireland who under happier auspices would ornament society, and be useful members of the community. It is surely a wise policy to remove also the drones, those who have neither the means nor the disposition (in their opinion) to benefit their country and who merely baton on its prosperity and add to its burdens in times of adversity; this subject demands the serious consideration of our rulers.<sup>25</sup>

As we have seen this request was taken up by the Government and many were helped to emigrate. One group which would have been considered a drain on resources were orphans, a group of which were helped to emigrate from Mountmellick workhouse. The board accepted the proposal of the Government: "of relieving this union of a certain number of orphan paupers by sending the same to Australia and that we undertake to cloth them and defray their travelling expenses either to Plymouth or London".<sup>26</sup> There was a list of orphan girls' names sent by the guardians to the commissioners and they then accepted that twenty two girls were to travel. The girls were to be brought to Dublin where they would board a ship to Plymouth and then another to Australia:

The master begs to report that he has seen off on a steamer twenty two girls from this house. That upon their inspection on deck by Lieutenant Henry, emigration officer, he expressed himself much pleased with their beautiful and orderly appearance. That their



outfit was agreeable to instructions and neatly got up. The master felt sorry to observe that their accommodation to Plymouth was very bad and uncomfortable which caused the girls to be dejected. They carried with them certificates of good character from the master and matron.<sup>27</sup>

This is the last we hear of the group until a letter arrives from Lieutenant Henry looking for 6s for two pairs of shoes. This bill was paid by the guardians and we hear no more about these orphan girls. It seems that there was a mixture of social classes who emigrated. On the one hand the wealthy farmers left of their own accord, while those who were considered to be a burden on the resources were helped to emigrate. The figures in each case remain unknown to us and we will never know what part of the overall fall in population can be accounted for by emigration and what part by death.

#### Rate collection

In the first years of the union the rate collection was very successful. The minute books do not contain the exact figure of annual rates; they record the figure collected each week and the amount outstanding. The last record of the rates due in 1846 shows that there was only £988,15s,6d, outstanding but by September 1847 the figure had reached £12,556. A large attempt to redress this had the rates due on the 25th of December 1847 at £7,643. A clue as to the desperation of the guardians over the collection of rates and the need for funds is obvious. In 1848 a Mr Abbots, collector for Maryborough, resigned

but the guardians refused to accept his resignation. Instead he was instructed to collect the large arrears in the district. The idle threat was made on April 15th that all collectors who failed to pay the amount considered due would be dismissed. They referred the matter to the commission for assistance.

The guardians were very much of the opinion that some people were not taking responsibility for the support of the poor by the payment of rates:

That while absentee landlords and others having charges on Irish property annually abstract large revenues from this country generally to its prejudice and injury and in as much as that such persons do not generally contribute their fair share towards the support of the poorer classes by employment tax. We desire strongly to impress on the Government the absolute necessity combined with equity and justice of imposing an income tax on all persons absenting themselves from Ireland for more than four months in the year on receiving revenues from Irish property (with the exception of members of parliament), the proceeds to be applied in aid of poor rates to such electoral divisions as may be unable to pay the rate imposed on them. That while we acknowledge the right of every British subject to reside in any part of the globe he may think proper yet we think that such absentees are bound to make some compensation to this country for the injury caused by their abstracting so large an amount of capital from the country. That a copy of this resolution be forwarded to said Lord John Russell P.M. and all the poor law unions in Ireland.28

It is clear that the pressures brought on the union meant that the guardians were forced to think of solutions. One of these was that the people who were escaping from rate payment would have to be made responsible. The situation got worse before it got better. On August 12th 1848 they made the following resolution:

for the state of embarrassment in which this union is placed by the neglect of the poor rate and the indisposition of the board to effectually apply a remedy; we are of opinion that the present state of things cannot much longer continue and we request the attention of the commission to this, if a decided change of management of the union don't speedily take place the workhouse must be closed.<sup>29</sup>

The next resolutions varied from requests to dissolve the board, to asking for the appointment of paid officers. They finally called on the Government to make an enquiry into the working of the Poor Law and that they devise a suitable remedy which would make it more viable. The union was in such a state that the guardians were not capable of providing employment commensurate with the necessities of the labouring classes. While things improved in many parts of the country in the next few years, the opposite is true in the Mountmellick union. The guardians found that in 1849 they were on the brink of bankruptcy and the situation continued without improvement until they organised a committee to investigate the state of the union in January of 1850. The report is very detailed and to recount even half of it would be impossible and also laborious.<sup>30</sup> The committee took on the task of examining the accounts of the poor rate collectors whose districts were in debt. The following is a table of the districts with the most arrears.

Electoral District	Mar.1849	Dec.1849	Inc.
Mountmellick	£616	£679	£ 63
Coolbanagher	£136	£161	£ 25
Ballybrittas	£ 95	£209	£114
Castlebrack	£162	£191	£ 29
Rearymore	£168	£204	£ 36
Clonaslee	£1,617	£2,050	£433
Ballyfin	£346	£577	£171
Mountrath	£370	£1,065	£695
East Upperwoods	£122	£402	£280

These figures give the details of the problem within each district but as we can see from the table the biggest problem is with the district of Clonaslee where the arrears far exceed any others, which they maintain is enough to keep all the rest of the union in debt. The Government, they hoped would remit the debt in the union of some £8,509 in total. But since they could not count on this they had to find some measure that would relieve the problem. They saw that many districts had in the last few years found themselves in difficulty because of an increase in the rates that had been levied. They resolved that the collection of rates should continue for the future and that the rate payers in credit should have their rate collected just as promptly as those in debt. They recommended a general enquiry into the economy of the workhouse with a view to making further savings. Another recommendation was made that a collector had to collect a given sum in three months and that he should be required to lodge a particular sum each week. This sum should progressively increase to the sixth week and thereafter decrease to the last week.<sup>31</sup>

The last years of the Famine.

What state did the workhouse find itself in the years 1848, 1849 and 1850? We do not have the detail of how the house dealt with the influx of people in 1847. The *Leinster Express* gives some hint as to what happened. On the 9th of January 1847 they reported that there were 1,050 people in the workhouse and the number of applicants on the previous day was 250. Of these only two thirds were admitted for temporary relief. This is a remarkable increase from the last entry of 1846 which was 487. The external treatment of patients began in July of 1846; this action was taken before outdoor relief was officially allowed. Twice it was necessary for the board to acquire two new buildings. The first was acquired on the 24th of September 1847 and this was a store which accommodated 400; the second was a distillery building that was to accommodate 500 people. In 1848 there was a fever hospital with room for 44 patients and the original building accommodated 800, in all enough space for some 1,644 persons.

In February, the records of the outdoor relief began and the number being relieved was 4,199, at a cost of £167. In July the guardians consider the possibility of finishing the relief works and one guardian wrote:

on this day fortnight I will bring under consideration of the board that outdoor relief shall cease in this union on the 1st of September next to all persons except those who are destitute by reason of age or infirmity.<sup>32</sup>

In February, the guardians advertised for 20 tons of

Indian meal, 10 tons of oatmeal and 10 tons of rice.<sup>33</sup> The outdoor relief was given in food rather than money in accordance with the Government's instructions. In Mountrath a Mr. Daniel Egan was paid 10 shillings a month by the guardians for the use of a premises where the cooking apparatus was stored for provision of outdoor relief. The guardians instructed the treasurer to pay the drafts to the relieving officers before the payment of any other drafts.<sup>34</sup>

The workhouse records of 1848 show the signs that the county was returning to normal. For example, the master asked that the full size steamers for cooking potatoes be ready in a week, this was in August 1848. In the same week it is resolved that the potato dinner would be given again. This motion was passed and the master was at once to make arrangements for the use of potatoes growing on the workhouse premises. He was to advertise for potatoes to be supplied on a regular basis. The numbers in the house had also dropped and in September 1848 there were only 1,199 persons in the house.

The board feeling that the workhouse capable of accommodating about 600 persons in addition to the number now in it resolved that outdoor relief cease altogether except in case of peculiar nature such as bodily infirmity and extreme old age and that the relieving officers forthwith furnish a list of such persons (considered destitute). All others to be offered an order of admission to the workhouse.<sup>35</sup>

However, the appearance does not reflect the reality. On the 23rd of September 1848 the master noted the failure of the contractors to deliver potatoes and he decided to

use brown bread instead. A week later the master makes a report as follows:

that the potatoes sent by Mr Pemrose after careful picking are not good nor could be given the required quantity from what the master has seen of potatoes it will be necessary for the guardians to adopt some other dietary.<sup>36</sup>

The diet that was adopted by the house had, they say, been considered by Dr. Phelan, the workhouse doctor to be better than most houses. The diet in the week of October 14th 1848 consisted of 7,164 lbs of bread at a cost of £54,4s,6d. For the same number it is calculated that indian meal would cost £20,0s,3d, a difference of £34,4s,3d. Other houses it was reported, were inclined to use stirabout twice a day which was much cheaper. It was decided to alter the dinner from bread to stirabout and the quantity of milk was reduced to 1/2 a pint for adult paupers. These measures were in consequence of the poor state of the union. The conditions of the poor for the winter, due to the potato failure, returned to those of previous years.

In December of 1848 the master reported that 80 women or 200 children could be received in the Irishtown house. Fifty men could also be sent there and a resident master would be sent to preside over the paupers. The numbers entering the house had once again increased so as to require that the additional building be used. On December 30th the number of those in the workhouse was 1,950 while earlier in the year it had dropped as low as 1,199. High levels of impoverishment continued in the

union throughout 1849. In January of 1849 the numbers in the house rose beyond those of 1847 to 2,014; the number sick, 203 and those receiving outdoor relief increased to 3,247. The master of the house was ordered, owing to the crowded state of the house, to take an account of all the widows with two or more children and to offer them outdoor relief.<sup>37</sup> Steps were taken as late as April 1849 to prepare stores by whitewashing them for the admission of paupers. The master asked for a clerk to assist him in the filling out of accounts during that time, due to the overcrowded state of the workhouse.

The paupers who were in the house were in need of clothing. A recommendation was made by the master that ready made clothes be bought since they were cheaper than making them in the house.<sup>38</sup> The question was raised whether or not:

in the present state of destitution and want of employment in this union there is sufficient room likely to be always in the house to receive such able bodied paupers as may present themselves.<sup>39</sup>

In May 1849 the number of paupers in the workhouse was 2,544 and the master requested the preparation of a store for the use of convalescents who were overcrowding the wards of the fever hospital. The occurrence of cholera in the union was recorded in the same month the guardians ordered that a medical officer and nurse be found for a cholera hospital in Mountmellick.<sup>40</sup> In July the master was requested to pick from the paupers in the house two wards maids, two wards men and two washerwomen for the



cholera hospital. Outdoor relief was being issued to 4,709 persons and on the 23rd of June 1849 the figures began to fall by August they had been reduced to 2,298. The numbers in the workhouse began to fall around this time also. On the 15th of September 1849 there were 1,218 persons in the house which had room in total for 2,526. Yet it seems by all accounts that the union in 1849 was experiencing its worst year ever. The repeated failure of the potato crop and the inadequate response to the resulting destitution saw the union under increased pressure to relieve ever higher numbers of suffering people. The result of these levels of impoverishment was the impending bankruptcy of the union.

A proposal was made that since:

the finances of this union are fast approaching insolvency checks of the guardians passed to contractors and others amount to £3,700 are outstanding unpaid and on next finance day should check be given for payment of the monthly accounts they would amount to £5,000; this state of things cannot go on, a resolution of the board this day, shows that the rate books would be in a forward state only waiting for the revising valuator to perform his part. However great neglect must be attributed to the rate collectors generally for inactivity in getting in the outstanding rates, the attention of the commission is requested to the whole matter. 41

The last months of 1849 saw the wind down of outdoor relief. The average number of people relieved each week in the month of December being 18. This drop in the amount of relief obviously indicates the success of the harvest of the union in 1849. But the reduction of relief does not mean that the state of the union

improved. It was still in a state close to bankruptcy and there was still 1,525 persons in the workhouse on the last day of the 1849. The average number in the workhouse each week for 1849 was 1,830. There was also outdoor relief in 1850 but it had been reduced to a bare minimum with 21 persons receiving relief on average per week for the first half of the year. The numbers in the workhouse averaged at 1,800 each week for the same period of 1850. The union began to recover slowly from the effects of the famine. The good harvest of 1849 saw an improvement in the conditions of the poor and a return to a more normal lifestyle.

- 1.M.R.Montgomery, Poor laws for Ireland, (London,1833),p.20.
- 2.Helen,Burke,The people and the poor law in 19th century Ireland, (England,1987),pp 40-43.
- 3.Charles,Kickham, Sally Cavanagh, (Dublin,1848),p.67.
- 4.ed.W.E.Vaughan,A new history of Ireland, (Oxford,1989),p.225.
- 5.B.Banks,Compendium of Irish poor law,General order for regulating and administration of outdoor relief 2nd August 1847, (Dublin,1872).
- 6.Compendium of Irish poor law, (Dublin,1850),p.610.
7. Ibid.,p.610.
- 8.ed.,M.Crawford,Famine the Irish experience 900-1900,C.Kinealy,The poor law during the great famine an administration in crisis, (Edinburgh,1989),p.159.
- 9.Minute books of the Mountmellick board of guardians,Laois county library,Minute book 1,p.10.
- 10.Ibid.,pp 140-200.
- 11.Minute book 2,p.85.
- 12.Ibid., p. 139.
13. Ibid.,p. 139.
14. Minute book, 1, p.25.
- 15.Ibid.,p.55
16. Minute book, 2,p.112.
17. Ibid., p.419.
- 18.Minute book, 3, pp 19-20.
- 19.Ibid.,p.80.
20. Minute book, 4,p.101.
- 21.Ibid., p.107.
- 22.Minute book,5,p.70.

23. Ibid., p.99.
24. Ibid., p.227.
25. Leinster Express, April 3rd 1847.
26. Minute book, 5, p.295.
27. Ibid., p.105.
28. Minute book, 4, p.228.
29. Ibid., p.293.
30. Minute book, 6, pp 149-151.
31. Ibid.
32. Minute book, 4, p.250.
33. Ibid., p.38.
34. Ibid., p.149.
35. Minute book, 6, p.321.
36. Ibid., p.345.
37. Minute book, 5, p.79.
38. Ibid., p.245.
39. Ibid., p.248.
40. Ibid., p.248.
41. Ibid., p.167.

## Conclusion

In order to understand what happened in Ireland during the famine years it is necessary to look in detail at the events in each county or even in each barony or parish within that county. The consequences of the potato blight varied from province to province and county to county. Queen's county was, in the years preceding the famine, growing in terms of population. There was a large farming population and a healthy proportion were small farmers in the cottier class. The town of Mountmellick had a number of industries distilling and weaving brought prosperity to many in the first decades of the 19th century. Farming in the accounts of both Coote and Lewis was advanced in comparison with many other counties. A wide variety of farming was carried out, rearing of pigs, sheep or cattle and growing corn. A high percentage of the population lived in second class housing, 20.7 percent of the population we are told in the census of 1841.

Yet as we have seen, the Queen's county was in relation to the other counties in the province of Leinster much more badly hit in terms of population decline. The decline in the decade 1841-1851 up to and after the famine was 28 percent but this decline did not end when the famine did. The county did not recover immediately instead there was a further decline.

Between 1851 and 1861 the population dropped from 111,664 to 90,650 an eighteen percent fall in the

following decade it again fell by some twelve percent. The famine years saw high mortality rates but we will never know how many of the 28 percent died and how many emigrated. However, the decline after the end of the famine we can safely say was due primarily to emigration. The famine therefore left a legacy that is still very much part of the consciousness of the Irish people today. We all hear of the family members who left for America, Australia or Britain, the long lost cousin who arrives to see where their ancestors were born. This legacy was left in Queen's as much as in any other county in Ireland.

The numbers on the land also dropped after the famine; the families in agriculture had fallen from 19,346 in 1841 to 12,971 in 1851. Many of the gentry were forced to sell their estates in the hope of clearing the debts that had arisen during the famine years. The number of estates that were sold in auctions under the Incumbered Estates Acts, of 1848 and 1849 came to 1,154. Within the county the effects of the famine varied. The worst hit baronies, if we judge by the population decline were Clondonagh with a 32 percent fall, Clarmallagh with a 32 percent fall and the Tinnehinch with the highest fall at 35 percent. The barony of Tinnehinch was in the north of the county with a large proportion of the barony in the Slieve Bloom mountains. The problem which arises in accessing the effects of famine is that no where do we have information about the levels of dependence on the

potato crop in the different baronies of the county. We assume that those areas with the highest drop in population were the most dependent on the potato crop and that a large amount of subdivision had occurred in those areas. I think it is fair to say that this is true in a Barony such as Tinnehinch where a lot of the land was mountainous and growing other crops or grazing cattle would not have been as easily done as in lowlands. The land being poor the poorer labourer could live on a small area of ground and still successfully support a family on the yearly potato crop and the work he could find locally. As a consequence of this dependence on the potato crop the population in that barony suffered greatly during the famine years. The town of Mountmellick was also part of this barony and the newspaper reports indicate high levels of destitution in the town as the famine progressed. Prior to and during the famine there was a large decline in the industries that had supported many people and they found themselves without any means of survival. Both of these factors contributed to the hugh decline in population in the Barony during the famine.

In any writing on the famine the discussion who was to blame is always central. The potato blight as we know was a natural disaster which could not have been prevented. The fact the there was such a large population and that such a large proportion of that population depended on the potato crop as their means of

survival, their diet day in day out meant that its failure inevitably would bring with it a major disaster in terms of human suffering. The level of the disaster is what has been intensely discussed. The fact remains that no Government could have foreseen the set of circumstances that hit the nation in 1845 and 1846. The Government's distance from the country also allowed for much misinterpretation about what was in actual fact the state of the country and the people. The seat of Government being in London and the lack of modern day communication made it easier for complacency and their persistence in continuing with the Laissez Faire trade policy. It was this policy that allowed the price of food to continue to rise and no matter how many relief works and relief committees were in operation they could not make it easier for the labourer to buy enough food for his family. Essentially their policy was to allow local resources to pay for local distress. In the first years, people of standing in the communities were required to set up relief committees and to subscribe to them. Later the Poor Law unions were the centre of the relief measures and they were funded by the local rate payers also. The consequence of the dependence on local resources was that they were eventually to run out or at least to be depleted to such an extent that adequate relief was no longer possible.

If we look specifically at Queen's county we see that the Government policies had, as in other counties,



varying levels of effectiveness depending on the exertions and contributions of the local gentry. William Steuart Trench for example was outstanding in his attempts to relieve the distress of the poor while at the same time turning it to the advantage of the landed classes. The number of relief committees set up indicates that overall the gentry in the county responded to the disaster promptly and did what they could within the parameters of the Government rules and regulations. Problems arose where there were no resident gentry in an area. For example in the Maryborough West Barony the Mountrath committee reported that the people were in an extreme condition of poverty and destitution and that this was due for the most part to the absence of resident landlords. There is a lack of information on the amount of work done on estates under the Board of Public Works and also the relief works which in Queen's comprised mainly of roads. If we are to go by the relief commission records of the contributions of the gentry to relief it seems likely that the majority of landlords in the county contributed to as large an extent as possible to the relief of distress. The work of the Quakers in the county was spread evenly throughout the county in the early years of the famine and no doubt it did a lot to relieve the distress in the county. The contribution of the Quakers did not continue on into the last years of the famine and as we have seen, the Mountmellick Union suffered higher levels of destitution in 1849 than in any

of the previous years.

The gentry found that rather than being relieved of some of the pressure to give relief they were in the later years under increasing pressure when the Poor Law Unions were given the sole responsibility to provide famine victims with relief. The unions were funded by local taxation and in Queen's county we see the effect of the famine on the Mountmellick Union which was by the end of the famine close to bankruptcy. The numbers in the workhouse remained high into 1850 and an enquiry into the workings of the Poor Law at the end of the famine saw the Poor Law commissioners decide to erect an additional workhouse at Donaghmore near Rathdowney. The erection of the workhouse buildings was put in hand in March 1852 and by September 1853 the new workhouse was ready for the reception of 400 destitute poor. Though the necessity for the institution had much abated since the end of the famine.

The *Leinster Express* on April 3rd 1847 talked about the numbers of people emigrating from the county. It also indicated that the people leaving were those of the higher classes, those which they feel were of benefit to society. The Government however, as the famine continued, decided to assist emigration. We see this in the case of the orphans who were assisted to emigrate from the Mountmellick workhouse. The absence of records prevent us from knowing who emigrated from the county but I think it is possible to say that those who left first

were those who could afford to go of their own accord. They saw that the country was in a state of extreme impoverishment and hoped to find a better living elsewhere. But as the famine continued many people saw that there was little hope for their future in the country and took what assistance was available to them and emigrated. The figures as we have seen after the famine indicate that large numbers of people continued to leave the county. The whole family no longer remained to farm, instead many members left the land and in most cases the oldest son was left to farm.

The famine was a disaster of major proportions even though we have no definitive figures of mortality for the county we can see from the records that there was much suffering and death. The Government financially did not offer the support which it could have afforded. The root of this lay in the political ideologies of the time. These ideologies meant that the Government would interfere as little as possible. They saw their role as giving the rules and regulations for the Irish property owners to provide for the relief of famine victims from their own pockets and unfortunately these pockets proved to be inadequate for the disaster that emerged. Consequently the county of Queen's suffered destitution, disease and death in the wake of the potato blight just as the rest of the country did.

I have concentrated in telling the story of the famine years, the measures of relief that were provided

for the famine victims, the story of those who suffered and those who tried often in vain to help them. Much remains to be said about the changes that occurred in the county as a consequence of the famine. The country as a whole suffered a decrease in birth rates and a decline in marriages especially in early marriages. The subdivision of land was no longer common and a whole change in land ownership began at this time with the Incumbered Estates Acts, 1848 and 1849. The size and scope of the research does not allow for these aspects to be explored, this story remains to be told.

Appendix 1

**The Workhouses of Queen's county established.1**

	<b>Mountmellick</b>	<b>Abbeyleix</b>
Cost of building:	£6,915	£5,850
Cost of fittings:	£1,381	£1,120
Site:	6 acres	5&1/2 acres
Accommodation:	800	500
Date of first admissions:	3rd Jan 1845	6th June 1842

Amount of accommodation on 1st of May 1847

	<b>Mountmellick</b>	<b>Abbeyleix</b>
Accommodation:	800	500
Additional accommodation:	400	100

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1. John, O'Connor, The workhouses of Ireland,  
(Dublin, 1995), p.259.

Appendix 2

Tables showing expenditure for provisions, necessaries and clothing of workhouse. 2.

Table 1 Mountmellick during half year 25th March 1847.

<u>Cost of provisions.</u>	<u>Cost of necessaries.</u>	<u>Cost of clothing.</u>	<u>Total.</u>
£2,512 s6 d2	£216 s9 d2	£204 s10 d5	<u>£2,933</u> <u>s5</u> <u>d9</u>

Table 2 Mountmellick during half year 29th September 1847.

<u>Cost of provisions.</u>	<u>Cost of necessaries.</u>	<u>Cost of clothes,</u>	<u>Total.</u>
£3,533 s13 d11	£147 s17 d2 1/2	£477 s7 d5	<u>£4,158</u> <u>s18</u> <u>d6 1/2</u>

Table 3 Abbeyleix during half year 25th March 1847.

<u>Cost of provisions,</u>	<u>Cost of necessaries.</u>	<u>Cost of clothes.</u>	<u>Total.</u>
£1,886 s13 d4 1/2	£250 s8 d3 1/2	£140 s4 d1 3/4	<u>£2,277</u> <u>s5</u> <u>d9 3/4</u>

Table 4 Abbeyleix during half year 29th September 1847.

<u>Cost of provisions.</u>	<u>Cost of necessaries.</u>	<u>Cost of clothing.</u>	<u>Total.</u>
£2,550 s9 d2 1/2	£242 s4 d10 1/2	£141 s6 d5	<u>£2,934</u> <u>s0</u> <u>d6</u>

£:pounds s:shillings d:pennies.

2. Poor law commission, First annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland with appendices 1847-1848, Appendix B.No.7.

Appendix 3

Order from the Central Board of Health 3.

Object of order:Temporary Hospital

Electoral Divisions for which the hospital is to be provided:Mountrath, Ballyfin, East Upperwoods and West Upperwoods.

Number of committees to which order for each hospital or dispensary issued: 3

Place in which the hospital is to be provided:Mountrath

Patients:74

Nurses:4

Wardmaids:2

Date order issued:15th June, 1847.

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3. Relief of distress, First report of the relief commissioners for distress, 1847, (Ireland), List of orders from the central board of health in Ireland.

Appendix 4

Number of rations being daily issued gratuitously and  
sold on 5th June 1847 in each union.4.

**Abbeyleix**

No.of electoral divisions:11

Returned:10

No.of rations issued gratuitously daily:9,288

No.of rations sold daily:1,814

**Mountmellick**

No.of electoral divisions:16

Returned:16

No.of rations issued gratuitously daily:18,606

No.of rations sold daily:3,979

No.of rations daily issued on 3rd July,1847.5.

**Mountmellick**

**Abbeyleix**

Gratuitously:16,519

Gratuitously:8,558

Sold:3,507

Sold:1,388

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4.Relief of distress,First report of the relief  
commissioners for distress,1847,(Ireland).

5.Ibid.



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