Efforts to promote a Limerick linen industry coincided with a period of intense activity in the industry as a means of promoting economic development. By 1704, a flourishing linen industry had already become established in the north of Ireland; fifty years later the linen trade was being actively promoted in areas outside Ulster. The initiative came from landowners interested in developing their estates and from merchants eager to exploit new lines of activity. A congenial climate had been created by a growing body of literature on the benefits of the linen manufacture while encouragements of a more tangible kind were provided by the Dublin Society, the Linen Board and, from the late 1750s, parliament.

The Linen Board in particular had become an important agency in encouraging new enterprises. This is clear from the writings of Robert Stephenson, a merchant who arrived in Ireland in 1745, became a leading figure in the linen trade and worked in close association with the Linen Board. He undertook extensive tours of inspection on behalf of the Board, and the written reports that he produced furnish a unique record of the progress and problems of a major contemporary economic activity. Most interest centres upon the years 1760-3, when such reports took the form of a series of county reviews.

The reports for County Limerick are reproduced in full below, apart from that of 1761 which has been abbreviated so as to exclude strictly technical data. The author's spelling has been followed except for some renderings of place-names; capitalisation and punctuation have been tidied. Based upon Stephenson’s observations, fig. 1 charts the progress of Limerick’s linen industry in the years 1760-3. It provides both a temporal and a spatial overview and thus serves as a composite of the industry’s history and geography during the formative stages. Later writers such as Young (1776) and De Latocnaye (1796-7) testify to the continuing significance of the linen industry locally in County Limerick, but it was destined to wither away by circa 1840 in the face of superior external competition.

County of Limerick, 1760

This county is possessed of every advantage for establishing the coarser branches of the linen manufacture.
of the linen manufacture in it; flax is raised more in the farming way than in any part of Ireland; the quality at present exceeds the consumption of the county, being sold in market, from 2d to 3d per pound, good in quality, and clean for the hatchel. About Rathkeale, they are most remarkable for flax farming, the great part of which is carried into the counties of Waterford, Wexford, etc., for sale. However, the linen manufacture has not increased since 1755, and the little they do in this county in imitation of the Ulster manufacture is sold very cheap, and all their coarse yarn and bundle-cloth much under the current value of such goods, in Dublin or England, when made a proper breadth. The number of bundle-weavers in this county is very great, and they follow their trade but a small share of their time; the inhabitants are very numerous, the spinning generally coarse, and most fit for doulasses, and the coarser branches, such as are most extensive and in demand. There is reason to believe a society will soon be established in this county, after the example of Clare, from whose bounty and influence much may be expected. There is a bleach-yard at Shannonroe, kept by Philip Gire; under Colonel Bury, for several years, where a good deal is done; and one by Mr. Phil. Ryan at Reybagai; what the apparatus in either is, I have no certain account.

In the city and liberties of Limerick there is not anything done of consequence, except by Mr. Poe, who is a very extensive manufacturer. He has a bleach-yard near the city for his own use, is mostly engaged in the cheque and cotton branches, and appeared very ready to support any schemes the Board are pleased to propose. The linen drapers, who are shopkeepers in the city of Limerick, are every scheme that may introduce a linen manufacture into the county, from the inhabitants. The weavers and spinners of this county will gain large profits as soon as they are possessed of, and the cheap terms they may be led into in a few years. Three premiums of the Board are as follows: David Roche, Limerick; Christopher Carr Devis, Limerick; Darby Cloghassy. Limerick; Thomas Pearse, Limerick; John Rossell, Limerick; Edward Poe, Limerick; Geo. Brudennell. Newcastle; Henry Ball, Rathkeale; Her. Browning, Limerick; for Counsellor Perry, one; Alexander Woods, Mountshon; Philip Gire, Newmarket; Jonas Leake, Rathkeale; John Burke.

The Granary, Limerick, owned by Philip Roche, drawn by Hilary Gilmore.

Rathkeale, Edmund Greatrix, Rathkeale; Richard Yielding, Esq.

County of Limerick, 1761

The report of last season, whilst it lays before you the foundation for establishing an extensive and valuable branch of the manufacture in this county, gives reason to fear it may be a long time before that can be effected; but the efforts of one gentleman of influence in any county, when properly directed, will surmount every difficulty. And as there is a particular instance (among many others) in this place, it is as follows: When with the Hon. Thomas Southwell, Esq., in the county of Cavan this season and lamenting my not being able to prevail with any one person to try an experiment, in making or buying manufactures fit for exportation in a county so well circumstanced in every respect, he was pleased to write to his agent and other gentlemen in the neighbourhood of Rathkeale to collect the shop-keepers, bundle-cloth weavers and such others as might be any ways instrumental to try what might be done there. On my arrival at Rathkeale, every part of his directions was executed; and after having satisfied all parties of the possibility of introducing a double bundle-cloth, or doulass manufacture into the town and neighbourhood, where it is computed there are no less than 400 bundle-cloth looms, taking in two miles round the town. I promised three looms, value 30s. each, to the three weavers that should make and sell. Rathkeale, the three first pieces of doulasses, agreeable to my instructions, and not less than 40 yards long each; I also promised to such as should become buyers, to indemnify them from loss, on the first £100 value sent to Dublin market for sale. This experiment was resolved on about the first of October last, and in three months before the first of January 1762, upwards of 12,000 yards of the best and highest coloured doulass about 28 inches wide, which had ever been made in this kingdom, were bought in Rathkeale, by James Leake, Esq., and Mr. John Bourke. However, Mr. Bourke lost on his first parcel about £2. 16s. 10d. and the carriage, which was owing to his own fears of the market, and selling his goods too low; and agreeable to my indemnity, I paid him £5. 13s. 9d. and although I have given indemnities for upwards of £3000 in different parts of the country during my progress those two years past, in order to encourage adventurers, this is the only person ever called on me for a loss, by selling under the first cost. Mr. Southwell and the gentlemen of this neighbourhood have raised a subscription of about £70 yearly to encourage a market for the sale and improvement of their manufacture; for the application of which I prepared a scheme. I also prepared another scheme for the same purpose, by direction of Henry Hamilton, Esq., at Newcastle, to the amount of £120 yearly, that I have reason to believe will be carried into immediate execution for the employment of the inhabitants of Sir William Courtenay's estate. Since that time the gentlemen of this county have, in some measure, determined to form themselves into a linen society, and give monthly premiums in the towns of Newcastle, Rathkeale, Abbeyfeale, Kilfinane, Bruff and
Castle-town Waller, for which purpose I recommended the scheme proposed for Tipperary; as the spinning and bleaching cloth in each county are much the same. The Board will please to observe, that all these schemes are calculated so as to be executed in a single town, or estate, or extended to a county, be it large or small; and there is reason to believe that the gentlemen in whose estates those towns are, will have markets immediately encouraged, agreeable to this or more extensive schemes. The Palatines and others residing in the neighbourhood of Rathkeale, have this year sowed flax seed of their own sowing, the fifteenth time, and the crop is esteemed superior to the produce of any neighbourhood of Rathkeale, have this year sowed flax seed of their own sowing, the fifteenth time, and the crop is esteemed superior to the produce of any.

North of Tipperary; as the spinning and bleaching cloth in each county are much the same. The Board will please to observe, that all these schemes are calculated so as to be executed in a single town, or estate, or extended to a county, be it large or small; and there is reason to believe that the gentlemen in whose estates those towns are, will have markets immediately encouraged, agreeable to this or more extensive schemes. The Palatines and others residing in the neighbourhood of Rathkeale, have this year sowed flax seed of their own sowing, the fifteenth time, and the crop is esteemed superior to the produce of any.

The candidates for the county premiums of 1761 are as follows: Mr. John Bourke, Rathkeale, 5107 yards white doulass, at 10d. per yard, all sold in Dublin.

Geoffrey Leake, Esq., Rathkeale, 3600 yards white doulass, at 10d. per yard, all sold in Dublin.

Samuel Leake, Esq., Rathkeale, 501 yards white doulass, at 10d. per yard, all sold in Dublin.

County of Limerick, 1762. This county is in a very prosperous situation, and the scheme for market premiums has been carried into execution with some small alterations I made by Silver Oliver Esq. at Killiflin, 101 1/2d. per yard, all sold in Dublin.

The candidates for the county premiums of 1762 are as follows: John Morrison, Killiflin, 3640 yards white doulass, 101 1/4d. John Boerke, Rathkeale, 3326 yards white doulass, 10d. George Leake, Rathkeale, 2984 yards white doulass, 10d.

Mrs. Quin, Adare, 448 yards white doulass, 101 1/2d.

NOTES

1. Robert Stephenson’s reports for the years 1760-3 are deposited in the Linen Hall Library, Belfast.

2. A variant of dowlas, named from Doullus or Doullus in Brittany, and much used in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to describe a coarse kind of linen.

3. The most famous of the early Palatine settlers, Philip Gier was also teacher to the German school at Ballingrane and had the distinction of being the first local preacher recognised by Rev. John Wesley in Ireland. Wesley records his passing in a journal entry of 7 May, 1778, thus: ‘Two months ago good Philip Gier fell asleep, one of the Palatines that came over and settled in Ireland between 60 and 70 years ago. He was a father of these and to the other German societies.’

4. Retaining the connection with the linen trade, Edward Poe appears in Ferrar’s Limerick directory of 1769 where he is listed as a cheque manufacturer and linen bleacher at Main Street, Irish town.

5. According to the directory of 1769, Derby Clohesy was a linen draper at Main Street, Irish town.


7. George Bradenell appears in the Courtenay estate rentals for the years 1765-6. He held a town tenement (no. 48) in Newcastle and also land at Corbey, alongside the town.

8. Hercules Browning still upheld his connection with the linen trade in 1769 when Ferrar enters him as a linen bleacher at Main Street, English town.

9. He is numbered among the Protestant householders of Rathkeale parish in 1766, and his longstanding connection with the area is attested by an entry in the Rathkeale Church of Ireland register which records the burial of Jonas Leake Esq., Attorney, on 25 February, 1808.

10. In the Rathkeale Church of Ireland register the marriage of John Bourke and Catherine Archdeacon, both of Rathkeale, is recorded on 2 March, 1756. However, Bourke does not figure in the census of Protestant householders of Limerick of 1766.

11. Edward Greatrakes is enumerated in the census of 1766 and his connection with Rathkeale continued until he died in 1790. It is not possible to determine how long he remained interested in the linen industry.

12. Ten of his children were baptised at Rathkeale between 1744 and 1763, but Yielding had apparently moved before the religious census of 1766.

13. Like his father of the same name whom he succeeded in 1720, Thomas Southwell was an enthusiastic supporter of the linen industry.

14. Hamilton proved a long serving and energetic agent to the Courtenay estate which in the eighteenth century comprised some 80,000 statute acres in south-west Limerick. For an insight into the role of Hamilton as agent and for the introduction of the linen industry to Newcastle, see P.J. O’Connor, Exploring Limerick’s past, Oireachtas na Munster Books: Newcastle West, 1987, pp 67, 77-8.

15. George Leake is counted among the Protestant household heads in the census of 1766. The death of George Leake Esq., late of Rathkeale Abbey, is recorded in 1804.

16. Another member of the Leake lineage to Rathkeale, Samuel, also figures in the census of 1766 and he was still of Rathkeale when he died in 1791. Along with the Southwells and the Palatine colonists, the Leakes played a significant role in achieving a successful linen industry at Rathkeale in the eighteenth century: see P.J. O’Connor, op. cit., 1987, pp 94-5.