

# THE PROMOTION OF A LIMERICK LINEN INDUSTRY: 1760-1763

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

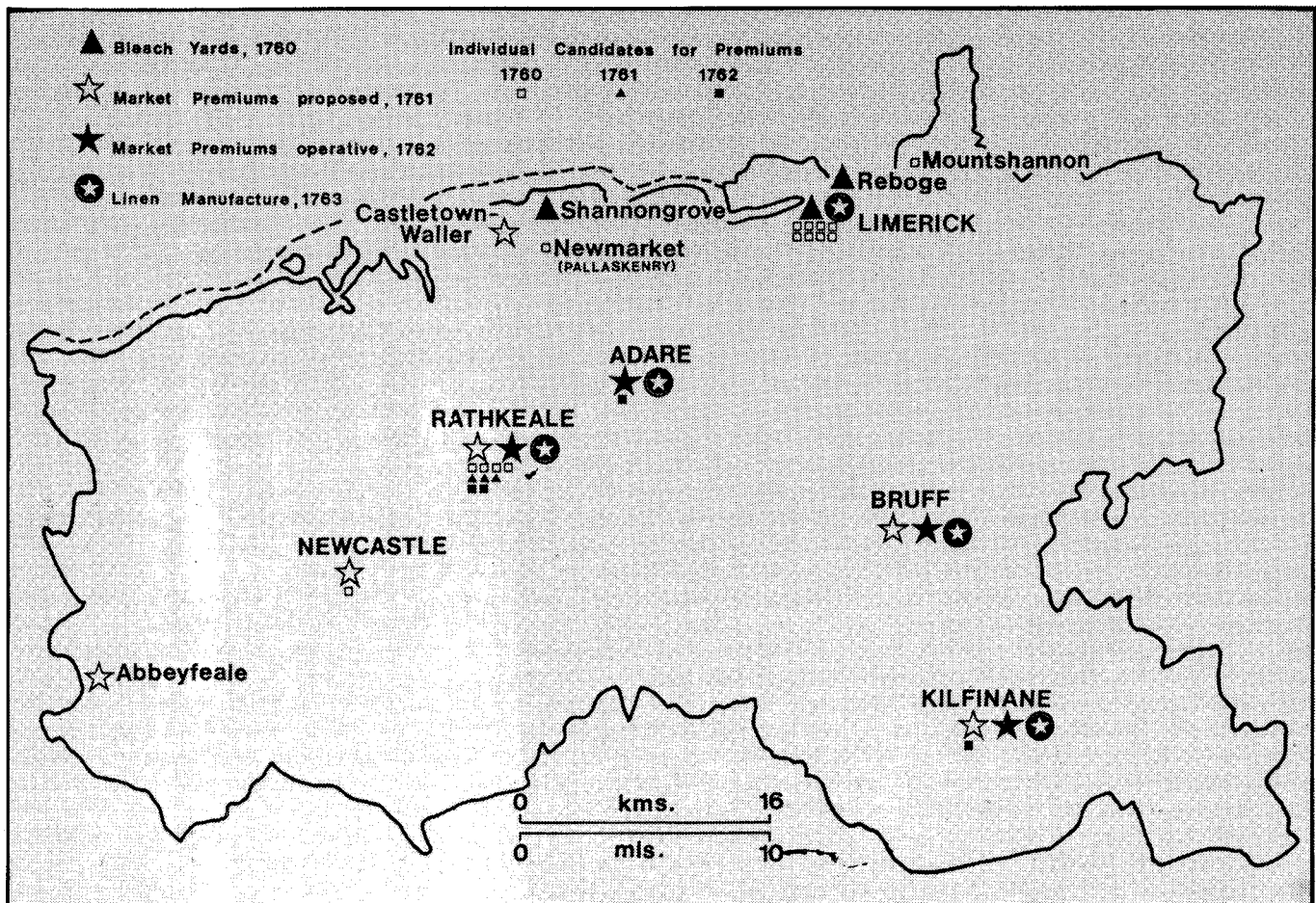
become an important agency in encouraging new enterprises. This is clear from the writings of Robert Stephenson, a merchant who arrived in Ireland in 1745, became a leading figure in the linen trade and worked in close association with the Linen Board. He undertook extensive tours of inspection on behalf 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

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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<sup>21</sup>*  
*This county is possessed of every advantage for establishing the coarser branches*



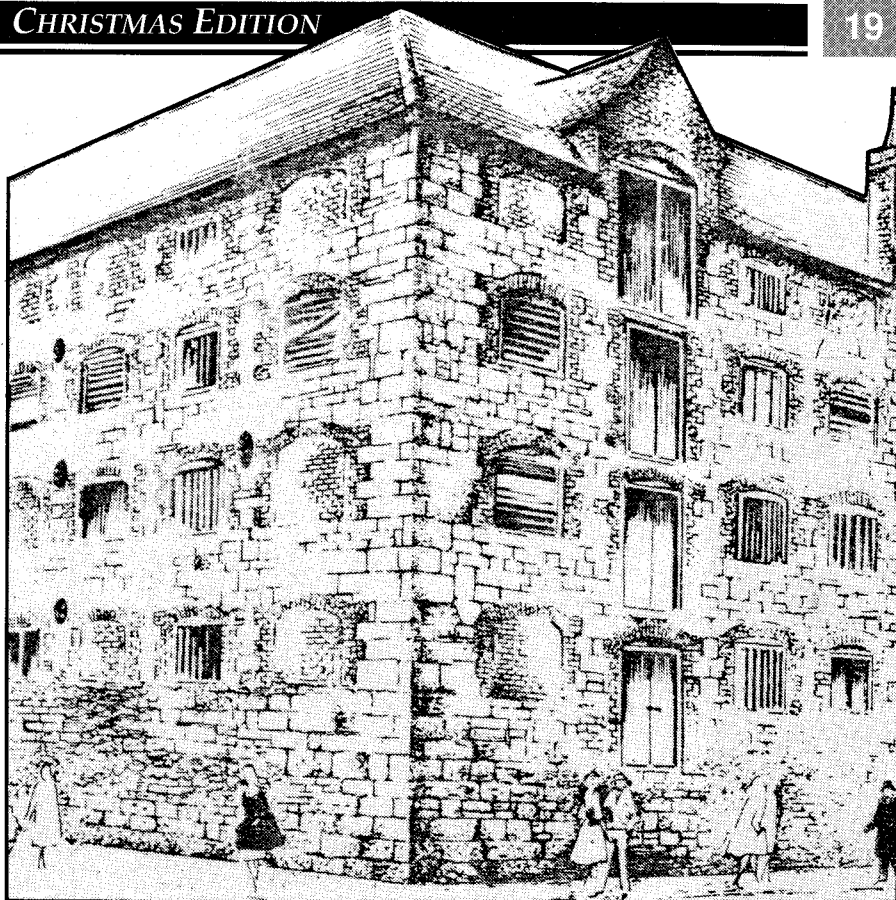
Map, drawn by Patrick J. O'Connor, showing the development of the linen trade in Co. Limerick, 1760-1763.

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 hachel. 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 manufactures is sold very cheap, and all their coarse yarn and bandle-cloth much under the current value of such goods, in Dublin or England, when made a proper breadth. The number of bandle-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 doullass,<sup>(2)</sup> 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 Shannongrove, kept by Philip Gire,<sup>(3)</sup> under Colonel Bury, for several years, where a good deal is done; and one by Mr. Phil. Ryan at Reybage; 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,<sup>(4)</sup> 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 shop-keepers in the city of Limerick, are resolved to discourage to their utmost every scheme that may introduce a linen manufacture into the county, from the selfish motive, that it may daily lessen their trade of bringing up north country linens to vend in their shops to the inhabitants.

The weavers and spinners of this county will gain large profits as soon as an export trade is introduced, their flax being so extremely cheap, and if a society can be formed the ensuing season, with a tolerable subscription, considering their many advantages in the number of bandle-weavers, flax farmers, spinners etc. they are possessed of, and the cheap terms on which they can bring their goods to market, there is no doubt of their becoming very eminent in some branches, that they may be led into in a few years.

The candidates that offered for the three premiums of the Board are as follows: David Roche, Limerick; Christopher Carr Davis, Limerick; Darby Cloghasy,<sup>(5)</sup> Limerick; Thomas Pearse, Limerick; John Rosset,<sup>(6)</sup> Limerick; Edward Poe, Limerick; Geo. Brudenell,<sup>(7)</sup> Newcastle; Henry Ball, Rathkeale; Her. Browning,<sup>(8)</sup> Limerick; for Counsellor Perry, one; Alexander Woods, Mountshan; Philip Gire, Newmarket; Jonas Leake,<sup>(9)</sup> Rathkeale; John Burke,<sup>(10)</sup>



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

Rathkeale, Edmund Greatrix,<sup>(11)</sup> Rathkeale; Richard Yielding,<sup>(12)</sup> 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:<sup>(13)</sup>

When with the Hon. Thomas Southwell, Esq.<sup>(13)</sup> 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, bandle-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 bandle-cloth, or doullass manufacture into the town and neighbourhood, where it is computed there are no less than 400 bandle-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 in Rathkeale, the three first pieces of doullass, 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 loom doullass 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,<sup>(14)</sup> 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

Castletown-Waller, for which purpose I recommended the scheme proposed for Tipperary; as the spinning and bandle-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, if a society cannot be supported. The Palatines and others residing in the neighbourhood of Rathkeale, have this year sowed flax seed of their own saving, the fifteenth time, and the crop is esteemed superior to the produce of any foreign seed imported which they have yearly experience of in different parts of the county. The simple method of saving the seed with certainty and success is to dry and save it like oats in the field when pulled, and then stack it separately, or among the corn until the following spring, before the seed is thrashed out.

County of Limerick, 1762.

This county is in a very prosperous situation, the doullass made in it hitherto being the best in the kingdom, and the scheme for market premiums has been carried into execution with some small alterations I made by Silver Oliver Esq. at Kilfinane; Widenham Quin, Esq. at Adare; and Sir Harry Hartstonge, Bart. at Bruff. Those markets, with that established at Rathkeale by the Hon. Mr. Southwell, will in a great measure supply the necessities of the poor weavers and spinners of this county. They are better supplied with flax and yarn in this county than in any part of Munster, and I have hopes of speedily seeing the manufacture of doullass flourish all over this country; there are various private schemes carrying on to promote the manufacture in different parts, all of which shall be laid before the Board as they become of any consequence.

The candidates for the county premiums of 1761 are as follows:

Mr. John Bourke, Rathkeale, 5107 yards white doullass, at 10d. per yard, all sold in Dublin.

Geo. Leake, Esq., Rathkeale,<sup>(15)</sup> Rathkeale, 3600 yards white doullass, at 10d. per yard, all sold in Dublin.

Mr. Sam. Leake,<sup>(16)</sup> Rathkeale, 501 yards white doullass, at 10d. per yard, all sold in Dublin.

County of Limerick, 1763.

The linen manufacture is increasing in this county, and by the particular attention of the gentlemen in the several parts of it, there is no doubt of its being extended throughout the whole; at Rathkeale, the best establishment of the doullass manufacture made under the direction of the Hon. Thomas Southwell, is still maintained; and at Kilfinane Silver Oliver, Esq. has got a good beginning made; Mrs. Quin at Adare has got some of the best

doullass manufactured that have been ever made in the kingdom; she observes that the yarn of her doullass was spun on what is called an Irish wheel, with a hoop rim, and comes at half the price of the Dutch wheel, and answers every purpose of the Dutch wheel, whereby the Board would be enabled to give double the number of wheels in those counties where no other yarn than the coarse pound yarn is made. Sir Henry Hartstonge, Bart. has done a considerable deal at Bruff and continues his spinning school in an extensive way; at Adare, Mr. Quin has encouraged many weavers to settle and Mrs. Quin keeps a number of children employed in spinning. Flax farming stands in the same point of view as last season; Mr. Oliver distributed at a price considerably under the first cost several hogsheads of flax seed this season. The manufactures and bleach-yard carried on by Mr. Poe in the city and liberties of Limerick are continued and much extended, and he employs great numbers of the inhabitants and is daily adding to the variety of his branches in the cotton and cheque way.

I have reported to the Board the person I have no doubt of proving to be the author of the counterfeit certificates to obtain flax premiums in this county, Cork and Kerry, and it is of the utmost consequence to the Board and the public to detect all frauds and attempts to impose on the Board, I wish and sincerely recommend that the authors and all concerned in this wicked scheme to defraud the Board and the public, may be prosecuted and punished in as exemplary a manner as the law will admit of.

The candidates that appeared for the county premiums of 1762 are as follows: John Morrison, Kilfinane, 3640 yards white doullass, 101/4d.

John Bourke, Rathkeale, 3326 yards white doullass, 10d.

George Leake, Rathkeale, 2984 yards white doullass, 10d.

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

#### 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 Daoulas or Doulas 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 Guier 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 Guier fell asleep, one of the Palatines that came over and settled in Ireland between 60 and 70 years ago. He was a father both to 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, Irishtown.

5. According to the directory of 1769, Derby Clohesy was a linen draper at Main Street, Irishtown.
6. Ferrar's directory places John Russell, linen draper, at Baal's Bridge in 1769.
7. George Brudenell appears on the Courtenay estate rentals for the years 1762-5. He held a town tenement (no. 48) in Newcastle and also land at Gortboy, 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, Englishtown.
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 households 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, Oireacht na Mumhan 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 of 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 establishing a successful linen industry at Rathkeale in the eighteenth century: see P.J. O'Connor, *op. cit.*, 1987, pp 94-5.