

The Night of the Big Wind

The 'Big Wind' of 6 January 1839 was a landmark experience, a horror that was, in its way, comparable with the famine, for what the Famine did to life, it did to property¹.

The morning of Sunday, 6 January, began well. The sun rose at about half past eight on a land much of which was white from the previous evening's snowfall. The day was calm, so calm that many vessels which had set out from port had to anchor, as there was scarcely any wind².

This was a bit odd, but not in itself alarming. In a house in Limerick city it was noticed that the glass "shewed the quicksilver under the extreme lowest mark of the barometer"³. This was an ominous sign, and one of the few indications of what was to follow⁴.

Between four and five o'clock, the temperature was quite mild and the atmosphere, though cloudy, gave no evidence of the elementary conflict about

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to follow. At about half past eight, the storm set in, blowing with gale force winds from the west-north-west, increasing in fury every hour, until eleven and twelve o'clock when it raged with all the horrors of a perfect hurricane. The winds swept through the streets of the city, extinguishing all the gas lamps. "The watchmen took refuge, in terror of their lives, under hall-door porticos and archways, no living creature being able to stand in the streets, while the spirit of the tempest was careering in all his might through the air, streaks of lightning, at intervals, illuminating the midnight darkness, and a shower of slates at every angle which was exposed to the blast, strewing the ground with broken particles, and flying before the tempest, like shreds of paper"⁵.

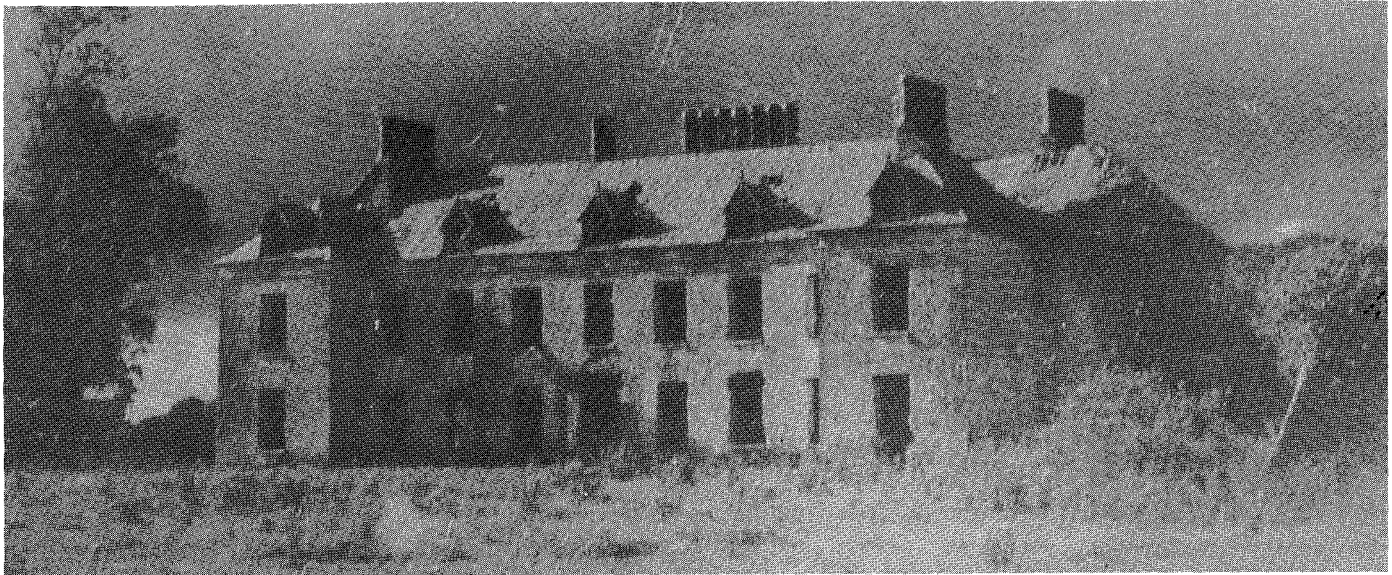
Not a public building in the city

escaped the ravages of the wind. The best built houses of the New Town trembled in the rude embrace of the storm and many buildings were dismantled in the upper storeys. House tops and flues fell to the streets, while the crash of window glass was incessant. To crown the panic of those families already feeling the storm's effect, "a whole stack of chimnies would occasionally tumble down, after struggling with the blast like a drunken man to hold his equilibrium"⁶.

The *Limerick Chronicle* reporter went on, "at Arthurs-quay, the houses rocked like a cradle during the worst stages of the whirlwind, for such it then was, and when the affrighted families hurried from their beds to the areas and vaults below for protection, they were repulsed in despair by the rush of water from the inflowing tide, raised to an unusual height by the force of its kindred element"⁷. The English and Irish towns, which constituted the abode of the less affluent of society, were



The Exchange, Nicholas Street, a 1900 copy by Henry O'Shea of an 1820 oil painting.



Ruins of Caherguillamore House, c. 1940. Photo by Stanley Stewart.

Limerick Museum.

scenes of ruin and dilapidation as the storm progressed. A large crowd of people took refuge in the hall of the Exchange. In their anxiety to escape what seemed instant death, some never thought of bringing any clothes⁸.

Looking at the docks and shipping, the splendid fabric of Wellesley Bridge⁹ was in a dangerous state, "a melancholy picture of the ruthless hand of the destroyer"¹⁰. Many of its pillars were dismantled and much of the stonework broke in pieces. The swivel section of the bridge was however undamaged. The merchant stores by the quays lost some hundred yards of slating off their roofs¹¹. The fleet of merchant ships at the lower quays had burst from their moorings in the midst of the hurricane. "Tide and wind dashed these vessels with full force against the only barrier in their path, Wellesley Bridge, which was struck again and again, breaking down its stone battlements and causing much damage to the ships in these dreadful collisions"¹². It was hoped that the storm would have abated by twelve o'clock, but contrary to expectations, the gale held on with additional fury and did not go down until between four and five in the morning¹³.

Around the county, the storm's destruction was also on a gigantic scale. At Lansdowne, the river broke through an embankment, sending a deluge of water through the fields, destroying crops of hay and corn and also cows and sheep. At Coonagh, a poor man named Hickey, his wife and two children, were carried off as the flood went through their cabin. The father and the two children were drowned, with the mother left a widow, having been thrown upon a hedge by the flood waters. The roof of Mr. Maxwell's residence at Islandmore, Croom, was demolished. Milford House, near the city, was dismantled and the occupants obliged to abandon their home. Plassey House was damaged, trees torn up, with great damage to windows and slates. Kilballyowen Demesne was ravaged, with many trees laid prostrate¹⁴.



Postcard of Sarsfield Bridge from O'Callaghan's Strand, c. 1910.

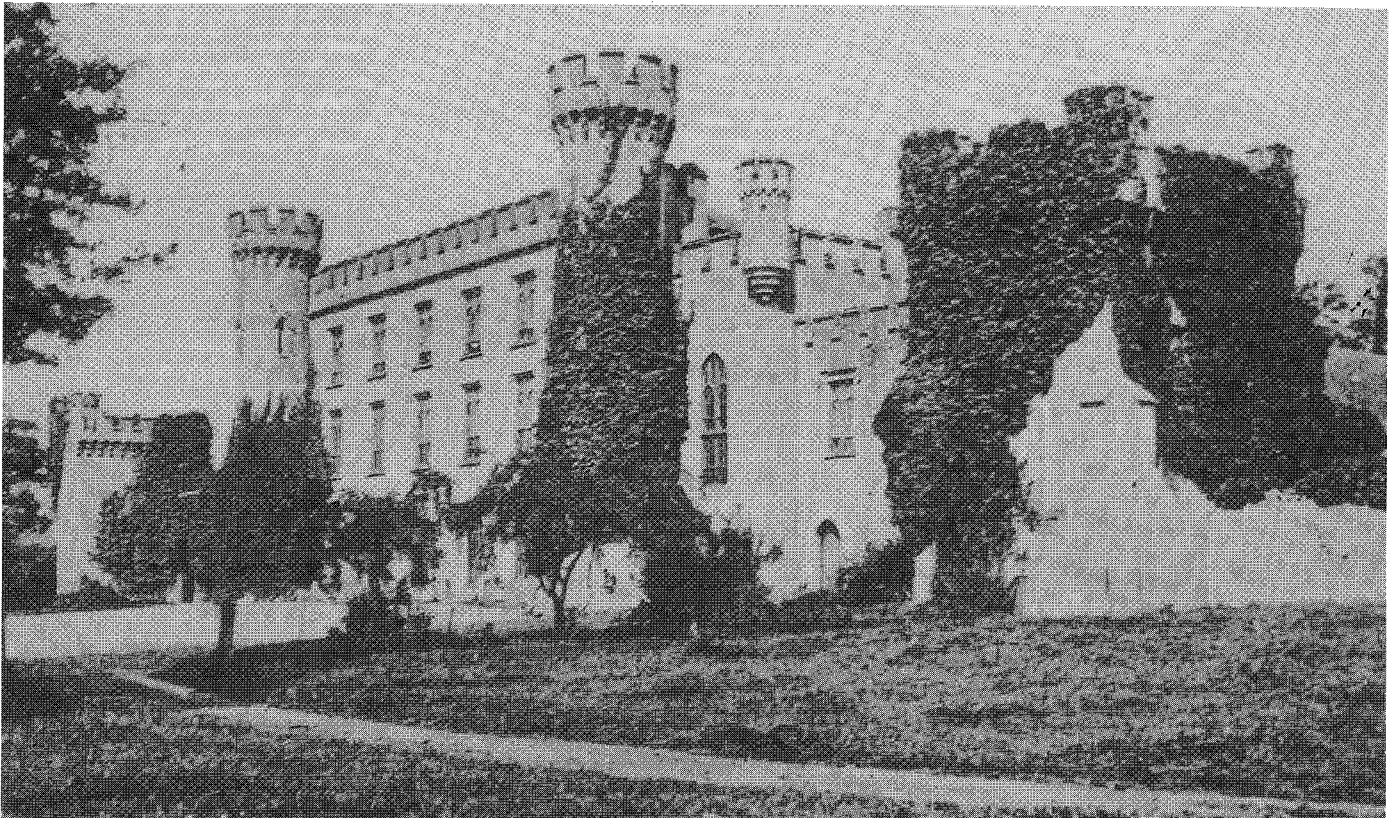
Limerick Museum.

At Newcastle, Shannon View and Shannon Park, a large number of aged elm trees were felled. Many large trees were blown down at Ash-hill Towers, Kilmallock. Forty trees were torn up at Corbally, the residence of Poole Gabbett Esq., also several on the demesne of Daniel Gabbett Esq. at the North Strand. About 100 trees were blown down on the demesne of Mountshannon, the seat of the Earl of Clare, and in the neighbourhood some poor people's cabins were blown down, with a poor man at Ahane having a horse and pig killed. The house of Daniel Neal, a farmer at Cappamore, fell in and six cows were killed. A horse and cow were killed at Abington, while at Boher the house of Christopher Keays was destroyed¹⁵.

Bruff and its vicinity was thrown into a frightful panic by the destructive power of the storm. The townspeople were seen flying in all directions seeking shelter, most having abandoned their dwellings, many of which were in ruins. The police rushed out of their barracks, the roof of

which was totally destroyed¹⁶. On the street in the village of Bruff such was the anarchy that raged during the storm that it seemed that there was "two invisible armies throwing slates, pots and tiles at each other, as when the wind shifted, it would bring the slates from the opposite side against the slates on this side, and they often met in the air with such violence as to shatter them all to bits"¹⁷.

The demesnes of Adare, Curragh, Castletown, Shannongrove, Tervoe, Caherguillamore, Doonass, Hermitage, Tinerana, Kilballyowen and 'Ballinaguard' suffered severely with many hundreds of the oldest and finest trees torn up. The chapels at Stonehall and Cappa were reported to be complete wrecks. The pinnacles on the spires of the churches at Castletown and Chapel Russell were blown down. Several houses in Pallaskenry, Askeaton and Kildimo were unroofed. At Newcastle West the fever hospital, courthouse, bridewell, barrack, chapel and a number of houses in the town were stripped of lead, slate and



Postcard of Ashill Towers, Kilmallock, c. 1910.

Limerick Museum.

ridge tile. A number of cabins in the neighbourhood were levelled to the ground, while the Catholic church at Ashford was unroofed¹⁸.

On the River Shannon it was feared that not half of the thirty sail boats that left Limerick quay on Sunday, after discharging turf and oats, to return with fresh cargos could have survived the storm. By 9 January it was learned that four ships were lost on the river. At the anchorage at Tarbert Roads, the *Gleaner* had, during the gale, lost a boat from her deck and both anchors. She later ran for Foynes, where she lost a second boat. The cruiser, the *Hamilton*, was driven from Tarbert to be laid high and dry alongside the road wall at Mount Trenchard, Loughill. Three days after the storm, the death toll in Limerick city and county had reached sixteen¹⁹.

The 'Big Wind' of 1839 is held to be the greatest storm ever to hit these islands. What caused it, why was it so extreme? It is hard to say. Storms of this intensity in these latitudes are still largely an unknown quantity. The antiquity of the storm is another hindrance. The amount of meteorological data available on it is limited, so any examination of its cause must involve a lot of guesswork. Essentially, the 'Big Wind' was caused by a deep, fast moving depression passing several hundred miles to the north of Ireland. The origins of depressions in these latitudes are to be found in the behaviour of high altitude wind streams known as the midlatitude westerlies, a notoriously unstable set of high level air currents which governs wind patterns over Europe, mixing with ground air patterns to form depressions - zones of low

pressure - which can powerfully affect surface weather²⁰.

Depressions draw in ground level air, lift it up through the atmosphere and expel it at very high altitudes. The better the weather system is at processing this captured air (and the Big Wind must have been close to perfect), the faster it flows in, deepening the depression further and therefore making the air race in even faster, triggering the spiral into a heavy duty storm. Within hours it is vacuuming up huge amounts of air, drawing it in from hundreds of miles off, because of its epic scale (the Big Wind attracted warm air from the Azores and cold air from Greenland), creating a sort of whirlpool centred on the depression. The storm's gust strengths are unknown. However, wind gust speeds during the storm's 'hurricane' phase have been estimated at 85-100 mph, with gusts in excess of 115 mph likely in the worst affected areas²¹.

The memory of the 'Night of the Big Wind' generated a mass of stories, tales of wonder and delight that were told and retold round the fireside. In Abington it is told that one boy was made so afraid by tales of the Big Wind that he was given 'The Night of the Big Wind' as a nickname²².

The memory of the storm was revived in 1909 when the introduction of the Pensions Act entitled everyone of seventy and over to a weekly pension of five shillings. But who was over seventy, when in many places there were no written records? Enter the Big Wind once again, this time in the unaccustomed role of provider, rather than destroyer. If you could remember the wind or put up a reasonable show of having been around at

the time, you qualified for the pension. Its amazing what you can remember if you have a good enough incentive. An estimated 128% of Ireland's pensionable population made a point of getting on the books, a fact that caused much comment at the Westminster Parliament. Those old folks were no fools²³.

The 'Big Wind' stands apart as a landmark experience. Every town and village in the land felt its dire effects, the most extraordinary calamity of the kind with which people were ever afflicted - a calamity that somewhere out in the broad Atlantic could be waiting to happen again.

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