

# Kilkee and Its Neighbourhood during the Second Year of the Great Famine, 1846-1847

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An earlier article dealt with the Great Famine in Kilkee and its neighbourhood up to the summer of 1846.<sup>1</sup> Despite all the problems caused by the failure of much of the potato crop in the autumn of 1845, by mid 1846 there were as yet no deaths from starvation in the area and no appreciable increase in the number of deaths from disease. The situation was bad but the worst problems could be solved by a good harvest in 1846.

## The Harvest of 1846

As the days of summer slipped by all eyes were on the new crop of potatoes. The Government was determined to be kept fully informed of developments and long before the crisis time arrived sent for reports from constables throughout the country. Reporting for Kilfearagh (Kilkee) parish on 29 May, Constable Robert Griffin stated that a quarter of the arable land had been planted with potatoes, a decrease from previous years when about one-third had been similarly used.<sup>2</sup> On 21 July, as harvest-time approached, a Treasury minute directed that all relief schemes be stopped, except in some unusual cases. However, on various excuses most continued to function but not, it would seem, in Kilkee. Towards the end of July the local Relief Committee made a plea for three or four weeks' further employment. Otherwise "we apprehend that Riots may be the consequence." On the very day of writing a crowd had assembled and threatened to break open the meal stores if they were not given means of subsistence. And about the same time Jonas Studdert, the local middleman, reported that want of money had already induced many to plunder the potato fields.<sup>3</sup>

But what of the potato fields? On 31 July and 1 August Mr. T. Smith made an inspection in Kilfearagh parish and, in general, found the potato crop in a fairly healthy condition. However, in Lisdeen he detected three acres of diseased potatoes and in Farrihy two more.<sup>4</sup> These were signs of what was to come—and the change came so suddenly that it was scarcely possible to believe it. In the words of Captain Mann, a coast-guard officer in charge of relief at Kilrush, reporting about the area west of Kilrush:<sup>5</sup>

I shall never forget the change in one week in August. On the first occasion, on an official visit of inspection, I had passed over thirty two miles thickly studded with potato fields in full bloom. The next time the face of the whole country was changed, the stalk remained bright green but the leaves were all scorched black. It was the work of a night, distress and fear was pictured on every countenance, and there was a general rush to dig and sell, or consume the crop by feeding pigs or cattle, fearing in a short time they would prove unfit for any use. Consequently there was a very wasteful expenditure, and distress showed itself much earlier than in the preceding season.

<sup>1</sup> "Kilkee and its Neighbourhood during the First Year of the Great Famine, 1845-1846" in *Nth. Munster Antiq. Journ.*, 21 (1979), 15-24.

<sup>2</sup> *Relief Commission Papers 1845-7, Constables' Reports on Potato Crops, 1846.*

<sup>3</sup> *Relief Commission Papers 1845-7, Inspecting Officers' Reports*, 4662 (enclosed with 4796), Kilkee Relief Committee to General Relief Committee, n.d.; *Ibid.*, 4965, Jonas Studdert to Wm. Stanley, n.d.

<sup>4</sup> *Trevelyan Papers*, T64/366C(1).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Mann to Trevelyan, 15 Nov. 1847, T64/367A(3).

The disaster was total. As the potatoes were generally set in mid May their growth was therefore checked within less than three months. What was left was no bigger than a marble, completely black, not a quarter ripe and hastening to decomposition when taken out of the ground.<sup>6</sup> In 1845 the failure had been partial and, at the very worst, the people had half-sound potatoes to eat for a long period. In 1846 the blight had come earlier and had spared nothing.

### New Government Plans for Relief

On 9 August a correspondent from Kilkee writing to the *Tipperary Vindicator* called on the Government to come forward and save the people from inevitable ruin. The Mansion House Committee should be reconvened while corn should not be allowed out of the country as in the previous year.<sup>7</sup> Eight days later Lord John Russell, the new prime minister, informed the Commons that "the prospect of the potato crop is even more distressing than last year," and that extraordinary measures for relief should be taken. The measures adopted were, in fact, anything but extraordinary and incapable of saving the people from the "inevitable ruin" predicted by the writer from Kilkee:

1. **Public Works:** These would again be undertaken but, unlike the previous year when the Government bore half the cost, all the cost would now have to be met by the district where the works would be carried out. Presentment sessions, meetings of ratepayers to discuss the works to be undertaken in a district, would be held as before but instead of being voluntary they would now have to be convened by the Lord Lieutenant. Works proposed had to get the approval of and would then be carried out by the Board of Works. The Treasury would advance the cost but it would have to be repaid within ten years by means of a rate levied on all poor-rate payers in the locality, i.e. those possessed of some means. In addition, the Government allocated £50,000 for grants to districts too poor to bear the whole cost of public works. Finally, all relief schemes undertaken were to last no longer than a year and to be wound up by 15 August 1847.
2. **Supply of Food:** With a slight exception the Government would neither import nor supply food. As Captain Mann wrote: "The object of the second series commencing September, 1846, was to endeavour to turn the supply of food to the country into its legitimate channel, the Trade."<sup>8</sup> However, west of the Shannon and in a few other areas government food depots would be established here and there—but these were to be opened only as a last resort when private traders had failed to provide supplies of food.
3. **Local Relief Committees:** Members of local relief committees were no longer to be elected but nominated by the Lieutenant of the county—which, of course, meant the disbanding of existing committees. The new committees would not be able to issue employment tickets as their predecessors had done. Instead they would only be allowed to provide lists of persons eligible for employment. Subscriptions would still be collected locally for relief, but the government contribution would not exceed one half at most.<sup>9</sup>

### Waiting for Relief Works to Begin

About the same time as the blight struck again the meal depots, which had been opened at Kilkee and other centres in West Clare in May, closed their doors. The new relief plans had not yet come into operation so that the people were thrown back on their own resources, which were practically non-existent. The cessation of the relief works, which

<sup>6</sup> *Limerick Reporter*, 11 Sept. 1846.

<sup>7</sup> *Tipperary Vindicator*, 12 Aug. 1846.

<sup>8</sup> *Trevelyan Papers*, Mann to Trevelyan, 15 Nov. 1847, T64/367A(3).

<sup>9</sup> Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger, Ireland 1845-9*, London 1962, pp. 106-108.



had been begun in the previous spring, meant that many had neither food nor the means to obtain it. On 27 August, Fr. Malachy Duggan, P.P. Carrigaholt, wrote:<sup>10</sup>

The suspension of Public Works here and the sale of Indian Meal almost contemporaneous, has excited a degree of alarm among the people, not easily conceived, and will probably be as fatal in its consequences as any measure the Government could adopt under existing circumstances.

Four days previously, on Sunday 23 August, a petition for presentation to the Government, outlining the position in the parishes, had been signed by over four thousand people at the chapels of Kilkee and Doonbeg.<sup>11</sup>

The picture painted was not a very pleasant one:

Up to the first of this present month your petitioners have been cheered by the prospects of an abundant harvest, the potato gardens looked so luxuriant, but at present, through all parts of this extensive district, nothing meets the eye but withered leaves and stalks, emitting a most intolerable odour, and the esculents that ought to be fit for use are perfectly black, almost unfit for feeding swine. They look for employment, some relief and a reconsideration of the Poor Law valuation in the parishes, with a view to exempting the poorer classes of occupiers from taxation.

And the petition ended as follows:

N.B. Diarrhoea and other diseases are already rife in this district, doing the work of death slowly, yet surely.

An official reply was soon received, which promised that if an investigation was undertaken and the statements in the petition found to be correct, the Lord Lieutenant would lose no time in putting into operation the acts through which relief might be afforded to the people. Immediately Fr. Michael Comyn, P.P. Kilkee and Doonbeg, appointed men who visited every townland in the district and estimated the provisions available to each individual family. It was found that in the whole parish of Kilkee there was not sufficient corn, meal, flour and potatoes to last upon average, for one month. The returns were then checked and confirmed by the local Relief Committee, after which Fr. Comyn set out for Dublin. On arrival there he sought and obtained an interview with Mr. Labouchere, Chief Secretary for Ireland, who gave him a sympathetic hearing. Doubtless in this interview, as in a public letter to the Secretary, Fr. Comyn advocated the building of a railway between Kilrush and Kilkee, pointing out that it would be of more general and lasting benefit than the levelling of insignificant hills and the making of new roads which could well be dispensed with.<sup>12</sup>

No relief works could begin until all the necessary formalities had been gone through and the projects approved. At the presentment session for Moyarta barony, which took place after the middle of September, a number of projects, costing £5,700, were recommended for Kilkee parish. These included the completion of the protecting sea wall on the west side of the town of Kilkee and a road around the bay in front of the lodges.<sup>13</sup> The

<sup>10</sup> *Relief Commission Papers 1845-7, Inspecting Officers, Reports*, 5581, Fr. Malachy Duggan to Relief Commissioners, 27 Aug. 1846.

<sup>11</sup> *Limerick Reporter*, 28 Aug. 1846; *Clare Journal*, 31 Aug. 1846.

<sup>12</sup> *Limerick & Clare Examiner*, 16 Sept. 1846; *Limerick Reporter*, 11, 25 Sept. 1846.

<sup>13</sup> *Limerick Reporter*, 25 Sept. 1846.

Board of Works was then asked for its approval. Unfortunately, just at this time presentment sessions were being held all over the country and the Board of Works was literally swamped with applications. Furthermore, as no immediate local contributions had to be made and as nobody was held directly responsible for paying back the government loan, the result was what Mrs. Woodham Smith has described as "an orgy of wild extravagance."<sup>14</sup> For Kilkee parish alone the sum sought was about four times that approved in the previous year. And as the Board of Works, with its poor office facilities and small staff, tried to sort things out, the beginning of the actual works was held up.

In early October the application from Moyarta barony was considered by the Board of Works and out of a sum of £25,484 applied for only £1,158 was granted. This was so ridiculously low as to be valueless. As a result it was appealed, reviewed a month later, and finally £10,077 was granted. This was a big improvement but, in the meantime, over a month had elapsed—a month in which the people were kept waiting while they grew increasingly impatient. And tragedy struck when four Kilkee fishermen were drowned in a despairing effort to save their nets during an unexpected storm in late September.<sup>15</sup>

As the days of October slipped by there was still no sign of immediate employment. On 11 October, Captain Mann reported that the better class of farmers had a few potatoes remaining but the common cottiers and labourers were, in most cases, without any. Potatoes were selling at 6d. a stone (three times the usual price), Indian meal at one shilling nine pence to one and ten pence a stone, and all other food in proportion. Normally, the poor had their own little gardens and got some employment digging the potatoes of the larger farmers. This year there was little of either. And he went on: "They are very patient in my immediate neighbourhood, I may say all my district for relief purposes, as yet, and I hope will continue so." The situation was bad but it would have been worse if many of the people had not large quantities of cured fish, which were to be a big help in the hungry winter months which followed.<sup>16</sup>

Few have inexhaustible patience, particularly when they are starving. About the middle of October a meeting of the new Relief Committee was held in Kilkee Courthouse where it was resolved to memorial the Lord Lieutenant for the immediate commencement of the works. Hundreds of poor unemployed filled the courthouse, "their haggard appearance testifying their destitute state."<sup>17</sup> And on the 22nd of the month a large number of people from the surrounding parishes gathered in Kilrush, again in order to demand employment. Two days later a public meeting was held in Ennis Courthouse to deal with the problems facing the county, and Fr. Comyn was among the attendance.<sup>18</sup> In the meantime the Kilkee Relief Committee had petitioned the Commissariat Relief Office for the re-establishment of a food depot in Kilkee. The reasons for the request were outlined by Rev. J. Martin, the local Protestant minister. The price of food was "becoming every hour higher and will soon be so high that not only the labouring poor but the people generally will be unable to purchase." If a depot were formed—even though it did not make sales—it would at least be a check. However the reply from Sir Randolph Routh turned down the request for a depot at Kilkee and also made it clear that the Government

<sup>14</sup> Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, p. 113.

<sup>15</sup> *Trevelyan Papers*, T64/362B; *Limerick Reporter*, 25, 29 Sept. 1846.

<sup>16</sup> *Parliamentary Papers* 1847 LI, 151-2, Mann to Mr. Crafer, 11 Oct. 1846; *Tipperary Vindicator*, 9 Oct. 1847.

<sup>17</sup> *Limerick Chronicle*, 21 Oct. 1846.

<sup>18</sup> *Limerick & Clare Examiner*, 24 Oct. 1846; *Clare Journal*, 26 Oct. 1846.



was not going to give any help to bring down food prices from their very high level.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, some time after this Captain Mann did succeed in getting permission to make sales from the Kilrush depot at a price which forced the big wholesale merchants to lower their prices, and in late November it was decided to issue meal to the Kilkee Relief Committee.<sup>20</sup>

### Working on the Roads

At the very end of October or in early November relief work finally began, even though the projected works had not yet got final approval from the Board of Works. In Kilkee 750 men were employed and the task of making a road and footpath round the bay was begun. Within days the numbers employed on relief works in Clare reached incredible proportions—23,899 on 8 November, reckoned as one in three of the able-bodied male population and far higher than the number employed in any other county.<sup>21</sup> However, in the extreme west of Clare public employment was needed not just for one-third of the able-bodied but for well over two-thirds and at a meeting in Carrigaholt on 5 November for the parishes of Kilfearagh, Moyarta and Kilballyowen, dissatisfaction was expressed at several aspects of the working of the relief scheme. It was pointed out that the rate of wages, 8d. per day, would require nine days' work from a man in order to enable him to buy two stone of meal at the then current rate of two shillings and ten pence to three shillings per stone.<sup>22</sup> This amount of meal for nine days would not even provide as much daily for the average family as they would later get under outdoor relief.

The insufficiency of the wages was also noted by two members of the Society of Friends, James Harvey and Thomas Grubb, who visited West Clare in early 1847. They remarked in their report that families were by this time entirely dependent on the wages received from the roadworks and that generally only one person from each family could get employment. Their report continued:<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, their week's wage, when exchanged for food, is not more than sufficient for three or four days' consumption. They endeavour, however, to stretch it over the week; but it is no uncommon thing with many families to be without any food for 24 or 36 hours before the succeeding pay day comes round, with the exception of the man or boy who is at work. To prevent his strength (upon which all their living depends) from failing, the scanty subsistence of the others is still further reduced, to provide him with sufficient to sustain him. So pressing are the calls of hunger that when the week's supply of meal is brought home (perhaps a distance of six miles) it is in many cases eaten before it is fully cooked; some bake it on a griddle; but among the very poorest, and where the family is large, in order to make it go far it is boiled into gruel. Is it then to be wondered that dysentery, the general result of insufficient and imperfectly cooked food, should be, as it is, so prevalent among them?

Insufficient food was not the only cause of hardship for the roadworkers. It was a cold winter and they were not used to working in the open at this time of the year. As a result they were poorly clothed in face of the icy gales. Captain Mann wrote:<sup>24</sup> "I always

<sup>19</sup> *Relief Commission Papers (Clare) 1845-7*, letter of Rev. J. Martin, 8 Oct. 1846; *Parliamentary Papers* 1847 LI, 175.

<sup>20</sup> *Trevelyan Papers*, Mann to Trevelyan, 15 Nov. 1847, T64/367A(3); *Parliamentary Papers* 1847 LI, 298.

<sup>21</sup> *Limerick Chronicle*, 4 Nov. 1846; *The Tablet*, 21 Nov. 1846. Clare's nearest rivals were Roscommon (20,106), Limerick (18,282) and Galway (14,714). By contrast, in Dublin only 48 were employed.

<sup>22</sup> *Tipperary Vindicator*, 11 Nov. 1846.

<sup>23</sup> Society of Friends, *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends during the Famine in Ireland in 1846 and 1847*. Dublin 1852, pp. 179-180.

<sup>24</sup> *Trevelyan Papers*, Mann to Trevelyan, 15 Nov. 1847, T64/367A(3).

considered that from the beginning of December to February, the suffering from weather, want of food and clothing was the severest and past any description of mine—causing afterwards the sad effects from disease.” And even where labourers had some clothing at the beginning of winter at least part of this eventually went into pawn. The result, in the words of Dr. Griffin of Kilkee, was that “the poor people go literally half naked to their work and sleep at night without changing their clothes, having no other night covering.”<sup>25</sup> It was little wonder, then, that fever and other sicknesses soon began to wreak havoc.

One result of the relief employment was that farm work was neglected, even though Captain Wynne, Inspecting Officer for West Clare, tried to reduce the numbers on the works and get the people back to their farms. At the end of November, Captain H. D. Hutchinson, Inspecting Officer for Clare, reported that in a journey of 56 miles he saw only one plough at work preparing the ground for wheat. And, about a month later, it was stated from Kilrush that all the small farmers in the vicinity had neglected their land as they had no seed. Unless the Government supplied this the consequences would be serious. In general, then, the picture was a dismal one and there was little to relieve the gloom. However, in October some landlords began to reduce rents. Amongst them was the Marquess Conyngham, one of the main landowners in Kilkee and south-west Clare, who instructed his agent, Marcus Keane, to reduce rents by 25% and 15% according to the circumstances of the tenantry.<sup>26</sup>

Although elsewhere in Clare there were disturbances of various kinds, Kilkee remained quiet. But it was only a surface calm. In early November the following notice was found at Doonbeg Chapel and probably at Kilkee also:<sup>27</sup>

Notice is hereby given, to the needy and distressed in this parish, to assemble on Monday at the Kilrush Workhouse in order to be admitted themselves and their families, and if refused, to be willing to commit depredations, slaughter cattle, open stores and farmers' yards, before they die of hunger.  
N.B. One of these is sent to every parish in the union.

Later in the month the Kilrush Board of Guardians sent a memorial to Lord John Russell suggesting assisted emigration to the colonies as the best method of tackling Ireland's problems.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps they already had some premonition of the pressure which was soon to be put on their own resources—but, then, no premonition was needed. On 24 December Captain Wynne wrote:<sup>29</sup>

Without food we cannot last many days longer; the Public Works must fail in keeping the population alive. What is to become of the thousands to whose cases the Relief Works are totally inapplicable? The Relief Committees have not a shilling; they cannot, or will not, pay even for stationery and postage. I am obliged to pay these expenses; therefore nothing is to be expected from them.

### Soup Kitchens

As the old year closed so did the new year open. Cold, hunger and disease now went hand in hand. On 4 January the *Clare Journal* wrote: “The state of this country is becoming every day more alarming... Gaunt famine has already spread her sable wings

<sup>25</sup> *Relief Commission Papers (Clare) 1845-7*, Dr. John Griffin to Sir R. Routh, 8 March 1847.

<sup>26</sup> *Parliamentary Papers* 1847 L, 270-1, 281, 483; *Limerick Chronicle*, 11 Nov. 1846.

<sup>27</sup> *Parliamentary Papers* 1847 LI, 240.

<sup>28</sup> *Clare Journal*, 26 Nov. 1846.

<sup>29</sup> *Parliamentary Papers* 1847 L, 436, Capt. Wynne to Lieut. Col. Jones, 24 Dec. 1846.



over the land..." And three days later it commented: "Throughout the entire extent of this county destitution prevails to a frightful extent but perhaps in no part of it is the condition of the people more painfully distressing than in Kilkee and the surrounding country."

It was not surprising, then, that in the early days of January a deputation consisting of Henry S. Burton of Carrigaholt, Rev. Mr. Martin, Fr. M. Duggan and Fr. M. Comyn went to Dublin seeking further employment for the poor of their district. When they met Mr. Labouchere, the Chief Secretary, they pointed out that in their area the proportion employed on public works was no more than one in 7½. Those employed had been seen staggering through weakness while at work and, according to the stewards, hundreds of them were never seen to taste food from morning to nightfall. The people had pawned their very day clothes and night covering and, after a hard day's work, had to lie down at night on a bed of straw without a blanket or coverlet of any kind. In Kilkee oatmeal now cost five shillings per stone, far too dear for the ordinary people. In fact there were so many destitute in the area that it would cost £1,500 a week to provide them with one meal a day. The deputation also recommended the reclamation of 20,000 acres of bog in the district of Kilfearagh and Killard. In doing this they probably had in mind the memorial of the Kilrush Board of Guardians to Lord John Russell regarding emigration as they urged that people should be located on the waste lands in preference to the colonial lands.<sup>30</sup>

Mr. Labouchere referred the deputation to Colonel Jones and Sir Randolph Routh. The latter asked that local subscriptions be immediately collected but was reminded that Mr. Burton himself was the only resident landlord in a district of 26 miles. Nevertheless, Routh continued to insist on an attempt being made to collect money, promising a grant equal to the amount donated. In the end the deputation did not go away empty-handed as they got an assurance that instructions would be given for increased employment in the area. Fr. Comyn next turned to the Duke of Leinster and in a letter asked him to use his influence with the Central Relief Committee of Ireland to get a grant for the starving poor of his parishes. Here his efforts were successful, as shortly afterwards it was reported that the Central Relief Committee had given him £60, while he got another £20 from the Indian Relief Committee. Rev. Mr. Martin also got £20 from the latter committee, as well as the gift of a boiler.<sup>31</sup>

The gift of the boiler by the Indian Relief Committee is indicative of the new trend in relief efforts, both at private and official level. On 25 January Lord John Russell outlined his latest proposals in the House of Commons:<sup>32</sup>

1. **New Relief Committees:** For the third time since the first failure of the potato crop new relief committees were to be formed, on this occasion nominated by the Lord Lieutenant. They were to be given the task of establishing soup kitchens which would feed the people without any work being required in return.
2. **Soup Kitchens:** The purpose of the free distribution of soup was "that labouring men should be allowed to work on their own plots of ground, or for the farmers, and thus tend to produce food for the next harvest and procure perhaps some small wages to enable them to support their families." Consequently, as the distribution of food became general, the public works would be gradually closed and would not be re-started.

<sup>30</sup> *Clare Journal*, 7 Jan. 1847; *Limerick Chronicle*, 2 Jan. 1847.

<sup>31</sup> *Clare Journal*, 7 Jan. 1847; *Limerick Chronicle*, 6, 20 Jan. 1847; *Limerick Reporter*, 12 Jan. 1847.

<sup>32</sup> Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, pp. 172-173.

3. **Outdoor Relief:** Although it had been a fundamental principle of the Irish Poor Law system that nobody received relief unless he became an inmate of a workhouse, this was now to be changed. Under the new proposed legislation paupers would be given outdoor relief, to be paid for out of the local rates, and in fact the Soup Kitchen Act was only intended as a temporary measure to feed the people until the necessary legislative and other steps had been taken to provide outdoor relief at the workhouses. It was not until four months later that the Irish Poor Law Extension Bill permitting outdoor relief was finally passed and it became law on 8 June. Meanwhile the Soup Kitchen Act was in operation, having become law on 26 February.

Before Lord John Russell's official proclamation of his Soup Kitchen policy, the deputation from Kilkee and Carrigaholt had returned home from Dublin. Immediately a soup kitchen was established, with official approval, in Kilkee, and placed under the management of a committee consisting of Jonas Studdert, Fr. Comyn, Rev. J. Martin (secretary), Dr. John Griffin and a few others. It was decided that, pending the arrival of the promised boiler from Dublin, use would be made of the boilers which heated water for the local Baths. The new soup kitchen was to be supported by monthly donations—seemingly promised by individuals—and any donations received otherwise. They also had the promise made by Routh of matching any local donations from government funds. Commenting on the establishment of the soup kitchens the *Limerick Chronicle* remarked that the destitution in Kilkee was very great as many poor people followed the summer visitors to the town and then, by easily getting lodgings in winter, remained as a permanent burden on the locality. Under the provisions of the Soup Kitchen Act a new relief committee had to be formed in Kilkee as the one which supervised the soup kitchen in early spring had been formed before the act came into effect. This new committee held its first meeting in early April.<sup>33</sup>

The relief committee was not the only source from which the people received help. The Society of Friends frequently sent gifts of money, food and clothing during 1847 and following years, as did many private individuals also. The gifts of clothing were channelled through the Ladies' Clothing Society at Kilkee which seems to have done a good deal to keep the people adequately clothed.<sup>34</sup>

### Deaths from Starvation and Fever

As winter changed into spring deaths from starvation began to be recorded. A Kilkee correspondent wrote to the *Limerick Reporter* in late February.<sup>35</sup>

I am sorry to inform you that Kilkee, I fear, will soon be a second Skibbereen, the starving poor day after day falling off the works, and dying. A poor man named Blood... was found prostrate on the road, having thrown up a large quantity of blood, and, in a short time after he expired. This untimely end the poor man declared to be the effects of starvation. Many others, it is to be apprehended, will meet the same fate in this locality. God only knows when and where it will stop.

Other similar examples are recorded in the newspapers of the time:

*Limerick Chronicle*, 6 February, 1847: "An inquest was held on Sunday last in Kilkee on the body of a poor man who died on his way to the workhouse, Kilrush."

*Limerick Chronicle*, 27 March, 1847: "A poor man fell dead of cold and starvation at Moyasta."

<sup>33</sup> *Parliamentary Papers* 1847 LII (333), 53, Mann to Commissary-General Hewetson, 22 Jan. 1847; *Limerick Chronicle*, 27 Jan. 1847; *Limerick Reporter*, 26 Feb. 1847; *Limerick & Clare Examiner*, 17 April 1847.

<sup>34</sup> *Limerick Chronicle*, 10 April, 1 May, 5 June, 4 Aug. 1847.

<sup>35</sup> *Limerick Reporter*, 26 Feb. 1847.



However, the fact that individual deaths were still being reported shows that they were sufficiently infrequent to merit being recorded and commented on.

Fever now began to sweep the country. At the beginning of March the Kilrush Workhouse had nearly 1,200 inmates, even though it had been built to cope with only 800. Fever was rampant; nearly a quarter of the inmates were sick and the master, his daughter and the doctor were down with fever. The guardians, with a few exceptions, were afraid to go near it because of fear of disease. The fever hospital, built originally for 36 patients, had 48 at the beginning of March but the mortality rate does not appear to have been very high. However, the worst of the fever epidemic had not yet come. In the country in general it reached its climax in April but did not begin to subside until September.<sup>36</sup> Describing the situation in Moyarta barony in July, Fr. Michael Meehan, C.C., Kilrush, said that about every tenth family was in actual fever:<sup>37</sup>

There are, and have been all the summer, hovels in this barony and in every parish of it, where the sick were obliged to grope and totter to the door for turf, water, meal, etc., which a charitable neighbour would bring to the threshold and no further—the only friend that would enter there was the Priest.

The town of Kilkee seems to have fared somewhat better than the surrounding countryside. In late June it was reported free from disease.<sup>38</sup>

It was against this background that emigration began to appear as the only way of escape. On 18 March the *Clare Journal* reported: "Emigration from all parts of this country is now taking place to a most unprecedented extent." In Kilmearagh parish the numbers leaving were not as yet very big although it was stated that in the town of Kilkee many were trying to dispose of their farms and lodges so that they could begin life anew on the other side of the Atlantic.<sup>39</sup>

### Preparing for the New Harvest

On 16 March 1847 Captain Mann wrote:<sup>40</sup> "As yet, except among the strong farmers, tillage is very much neglected." Four days later the first reduction in numbers on the public works took place and further reductions took place at intervals after that. Although the purpose of this was to leave the labourers free to till the fields, the hoped for result was not achieved. On 24 March the *Limerick Chronicle* reported that there was no sign of the land being tilled in the vicinity of Kilkee and during the following few weeks there was little improvement in the situation. There were various reasons for this:

1. After two successive failures of the failure of the potato crop, many felt that there was little point in sowing potatoes. It was known that in America the potato had failed in three successive years.
2. The conacre system had virtually come to an end. In 1846 nobody who had let out land on conacre had received any rent and as a result the owners were now inclined to keep it for grass and cattle. In any case, probably few would be inclined to take land on conacre, even if it was available.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> *Clare Journal*, 4, 15 March 1847; *The Tablet*, 14 Aug. 1847; Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 202-203.

<sup>37</sup> *The Tablet*, 14 Aug. 1847.

<sup>38</sup> *Limerick Chronicle*, 23 June 1847.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 March 1847.

<sup>40</sup> *Trevelyan Papers*, Mann to Trevelyan, 16 March 1847, T64/362A(10).

<sup>41</sup> *The Tablet*, 23 Jan. 1847.

3. There was a widespread shortage of potato seed and, indeed, of seed of any kind. In many cases what had at first been kept for this purpose was eventually wholly or partly eaten as food. In March a supply of bere and rye seed arrived in Kilrush and was sold by Captain Mann—but not without difficulty, only “by dint of persuasion and having it published by the R.C. clergy.” The rye was to prove particularly successful. During the winter a supply of it had arrived at the Kilrush depot from Russia and it had become popular with the poor. Now a considerable amount was sown in West Clare, where it could be planted on inferior land, and it was to prove a good substitute for the potato when harvested.

Captain Mann’s difficulty in disposing of the seed may seem strange, but there was a simple explanation. The Government at one stage intended to advance £50,000 to landlords to enable them to purchase and distribute seed to their tenants. The seed merchants objected and as the plan might interfere with private enterprise it was withdrawn. However, in March and early April the farmers in West Clare were still hopeful of receiving free seed and therefore were very reluctant to purchase. On 12 April HMS *Dragon* brought another supply of seed to Kilrush. A little was purchased by a few landlords and then the ship sailed away again with most of its cargo. It was only at this stage that it finally dawned on the people that they were not going to get any free seed and Captain Mann was now besieged with applications for seed of any kind. A few days later a steamer arrived with a cargo of oat seed and the greater part of it was immediately purchased and sown. In the words of Captain Mann: “A sudden and favourable reaction took place, all appearing anxious to till something, and not let the land run to waste.” About the same time a large amount of turnip seed was imported by local dealers in West Clare and those who could, bought and sowed it. Then, at the end of May, Sir Randolph Routh found that he had 40,000 lbs. of turnip and green crop seed left on his hands and he gave them to the Society of Friends for free distribution. A small quantity of the turnip seed was received by Captain Mann for distribution in his district.<sup>42</sup>

The final result of the spring sowing was that the amount of potatoes planted was very much smaller than usual. On the other hand, a vast increase had taken place in the acreage under turnips. In County Clare as a whole only 6,129 acres were planted with potatoes in 1847 whereas 10,968 were planted with turnips.<sup>43</sup> Such a change would have seemed incredible even two years previously but it was to have some beneficial results. In the following winter the turnips were to save many lives as Mr. Twisleton (the Irish Poor Law Commissioner) noted on 25 January 1848 when he wrote:<sup>44</sup> “The gratuitous distribution of the turnip seed last year I believe saved more lives than almost anything else.”

One final point about the spring work must be noted. By the beginning of June little turf had been cut near Poulmasherry for the Limerick trade.<sup>45</sup> This was to mean a big income loss to the area.

### End of Public Works and Soup Kitchens

A correspondent from Kilkee to the *Limerick Reporter* of 27 July 1847 was very optimistic about the situation in the town:

<sup>42</sup> *Trevelyan Papers*, Mann to Trevelyan, 15 Nov. 1847, T64/367A(3); Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, p. 286.

<sup>43</sup> *Trevelyan Papers*, T64/366B.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, T64/368B.

<sup>45</sup> *Limerick Reporter*, 4 June 1847.



I have much pleasure to announce to the visitors who frequent this much admired watering-place, that the people, as usual, are most peaceable, and that new potatoes are now exposed for sale at the low price of 8d. per stone, perfectly sound and free from disease, notwithstanding the prognostications of the black prophets of the west. Vegetables are plenty [*sic*], and our markets are well supplied with beef and mutton at 5d. per lb., and our village presented a gay appearance already. Wheat and barley are doing very well, but the oat crop is rather deficient. Many of our poor natives have suffered rather severely during this trying season, which they bore with that patient endurance characteristic of the Irish peasant.

In mid August Kilkee was stated to be more crowded than it had ever been—but soon afterwards the season ended prematurely.<sup>46</sup> And to add to the people's losses the potato crop was anything but the healthy one expected in July.

As we have seen, the soup kitchens were intended to tide the people over the gap between the gradual winding up of the public works and the coming into operation of outdoor relief. At first a closing date of 15 August was fixed for the soup kitchens but the extreme want in many areas, especially in the south and south-west and probably including Kilkee, caused some delay. However, 1 October was definitely fixed as the last day for the distribution of rations in any union through the soup kitchens.<sup>47</sup>

By this time the public works had also been wound up—a process which had been virtually completed by the end of June—and the Government was determined not to restart them. Nevertheless, in late September, a memorial from the "Clergy, Gentry and Inhabitants of Kilkee" was presented to the Lord Lieutenant, complaining about the unfinished state of the sea wall and other public works and stating that all of what had been done in Kilkee would be swept away by the high tides of winter unless completed before then. A few weeks later a deputation from Clare called on the Lord Lieutenant and asked for a loan for the re-commencement of public works already begun and incomplete. The answer held out no hope. "We understand that his Excellency, while he deplored the wretched state into which the country had been plunged, held out no hope that the prayer of the Memorial, so far as related to a loan of money, could be granted." Still exploring every avenue, Fr. Comyn wrote to Henry Grattan, M.P., at the end of October with a view to having the situation in the Kilkee area brought before the notice of the Irish M.P.s at a meeting to be held shortly afterwards.<sup>48</sup> All in vain. The public works and soup kitchens were now very definitely in the past and West Clare was thrown back on its own resources, including the workhouse and outdoor relief when reluctantly made available by the Poor Law Guardians. What happened in the next three to four years made 1845-1847 look like the good times of the past.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> *Limerick & Clare Examiner*, 21 Aug., 20 Nov. 1847.

<sup>47</sup> Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, pp. 302-303, 307.

<sup>48</sup> *Limerick Chronicle*, 29 Sept. 1847; *Limerick Reporter*, 15 Oct., 2 Nov. 1847.

<sup>49</sup> Events in south-west Clare from autumn 1847 are dealt with in my article, "Captain A. E. Kennedy, Poor Law Inspector, and the Great Famine in Kilrush Union 1847-1850" in *The Other Clare*, 3 (1979), 16-25.