

The Gabbett Family and the sale of their estates in County Limerick

The Gabbetts were a prominent landowning family in Limerick from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. They had – like all landed gentry of the times – married into several other prominent landed families and secured their fortunes and status in society. This would all change, however, after the cataclysm of the Great Irish Famine and subsequent land wars from the 1870s to the 1890s, resulting in agrarian agitation in rural Ireland and the passing of several Parliamentary acts: the Land Law (Ireland) Act, 1881, Land Purchaser (Ireland) Act, 1885, culminating in the Irish Land Act, 1903, better known as the Wyndham Land (Purchase) Act. These laws would lead to the eventual disintegration of numerous great estates of the Protestant Ascendancy class, many of which were sold at the Landed Estates Court in Dublin and eventually parcelled out to Catholic tenant farmers. It was reported at the time of its purchase that the Gabbett estate was 'said to be the first venture of the kind since the Land Purchase Act came into operation'.¹

by Joseph Lennon

Family Lineage

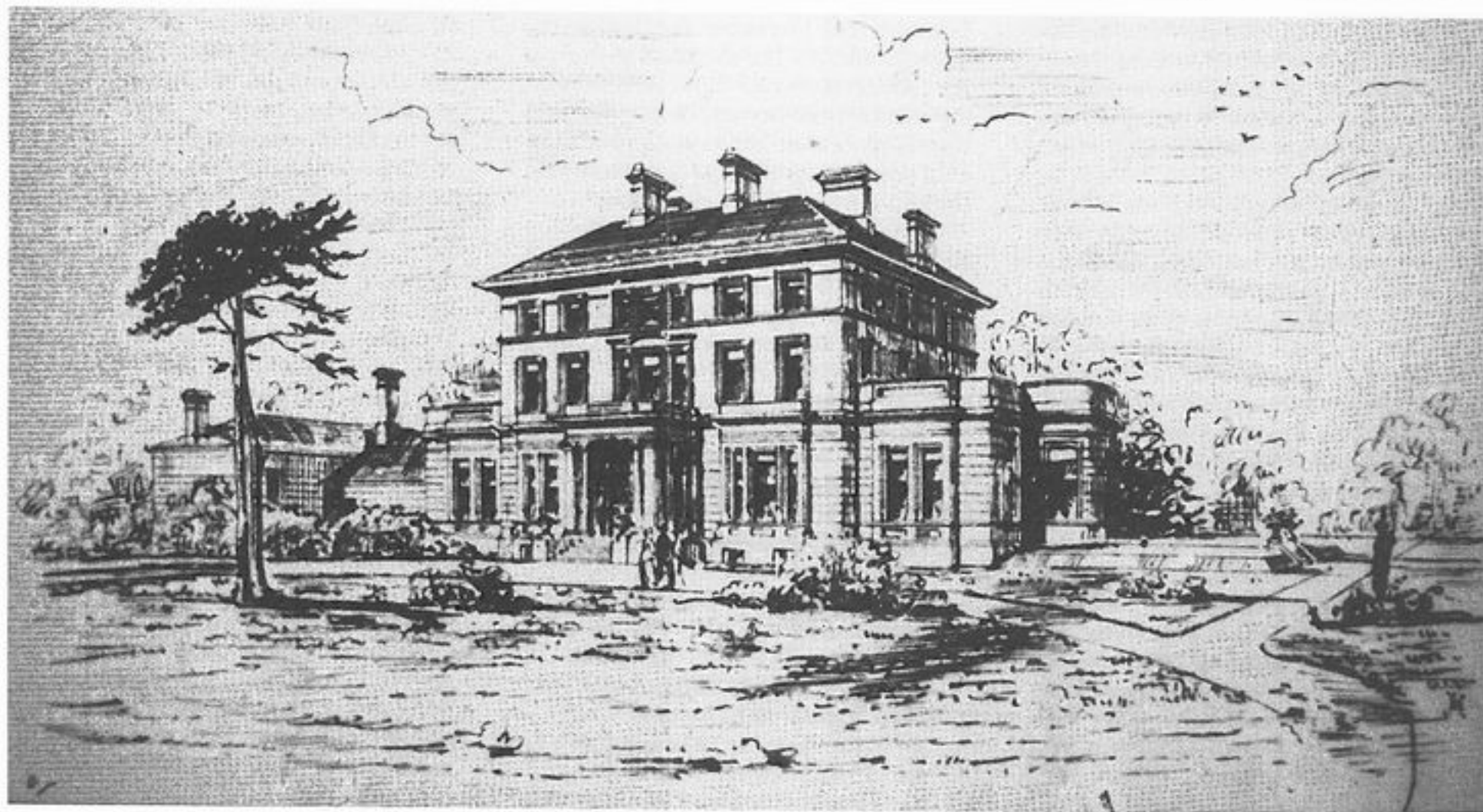
The family of Gabbett or Garbett is of ancient French extraction and settled in England from an early date. Robert Garbett supported the Earl of Richmond (afterwards Henry VII) at the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485 and subsequently served as Officer in the King's Body Guards of Henry VII and Henry VIII. The family settled at Acton Burnell in Shropshire, England.²

The first Gabbetts to come to Ireland were descended from the family in Acton Burnell. William Gabbett (son of Roger) settled in Ireland and was established in Limerick by the mid-seventeenth century. (His brother, Robert, died of plague in Cashel, in 1652). During the 1659 Census, Gabbett was the parliamentary administrator in Ballybrood townland, Clanwilliam Barony.³ Descended from him were junior members of the Gabbett family that branched into several estates in the county of

Limerick: Mount Minnett House (Ballybrood parish) and Strand House (Limerick City), while their chief seats in the county would be at Caherline House (Stradbally parish, Gabbett called the house after his estate in Ballybrood), High Park House and, for a period after 1866, at Caherconlish House. They also held properties in Limerick City.⁴

Gabbett Estates

William Gabbett had two sons: John (of Rathjordan, d. 1707) and William (of Caherline, 1658-1713), they inherited these estates upon their father's death in 1686.⁵ During the 1660s, Gabbett purchased the estates of Caherline and Rathjordan in Clanwilliam barony County Limerick from William Matthews of Templelyon, County Wicklow. (Matthews had been granted Caherline, Rathjordan, Ballyhobin and other adjoining lands with over 700 acres in 1666).⁶ The estate continued to prosper and, in a will, dated 25 July 1727 (and proved 27 May 1736): the estate and interest of his grandson William Gabbett, Esq., of Caherline, County Limerick, comprised the



Caherconlish House

(Image from *The Irish Builder*, January 15, 1872. Courtesy of National Library of Ireland)

town and lands of Caherline, Ballyhobin, Tonteere, Ballyvorreen, the two Greenanes, Killeagh and Carrigareely, which included the modern townland of High Park. He also owned farms in Clashbane, Baggotstown, Boherduff and Dunvullen. His sons William and John were among the trustees of his will.⁷

Joseph Gabbett founded the High Park estate. He was second son of William. He married Sarah (daughter of Reverend Ormesby of Athlacca House).⁸ Gabbett died without issue in 1741 and left High Park estate to his nephew, Joseph Gabbett.⁹ Hereafter, his namesake – usually the second son, some of whom were clergymen – was the master here until the sale of the estate.

By 1851, the Gabbett estates were dotted around Limerick city and county. Although the Wilson estate of Caherconlish did not come into the Gabbett family until 1866, William and Revd Joseph Gabbett held lands in the parish in 1851.¹⁰ In 1878, in the middle of the Land War in Ireland, the following Gabbett estates in Limerick (and adjoining counties) were recorded by the Crown:

Daniel F. Gabbett (J.P.) of Oldcourt, Caherconlish, 1,200 acres (and 12 acres in County Tipperary); Reverend Joseph Gabbett, 3,500 acres (40 acres in County Tipperary); Richard Gabbett (J.P.) of Caherline House, Lisnagry, 1,000 acres; William Gabbett of Shanagolden, County Limerick, 533 acres; Windham Gabbett of Mount-rivers, County Clare owned an estate of over 1,500 acres; including 341 in County Limerick, over 1,000 in County Clare and over 100 in County Tipperary.¹¹

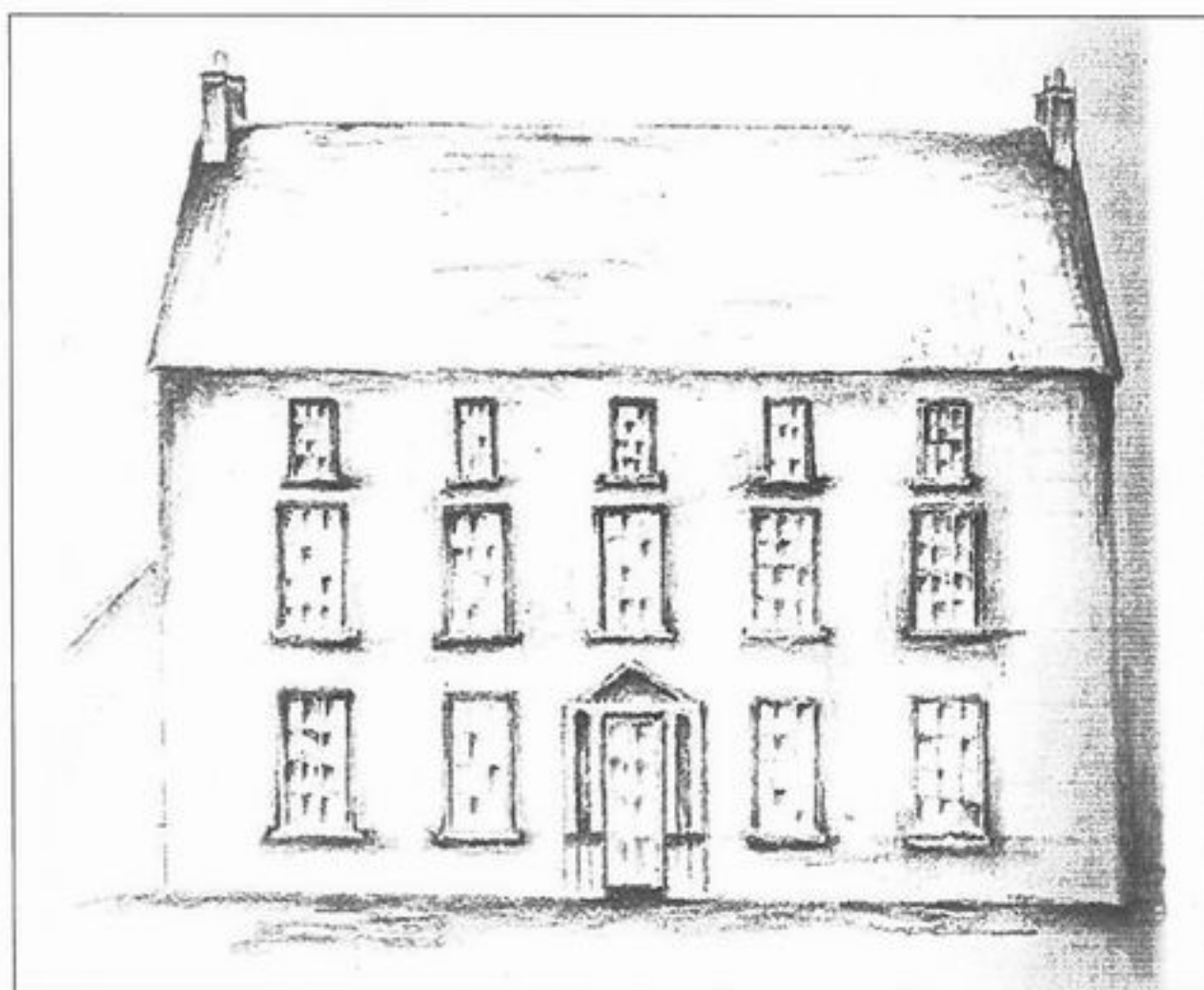
Political Activity

In political life, the Gabbetts – as was common practice among the gentry – occupied various seats of office in the local judiciary and government, while the junior members held various posts in the British army. The family held the office of Mayor of Limerick in 1775, 1789, 1795, 1818, 1819 and 1858; Sheriff of County Limerick in 1713, 1736, 1775 and 1813; Sheriff of Limerick City in 1768, 1775, 1778 and 1852. Indeed, 1775 can be considered the zenith of Gabbett power in the county when William Gabbett of Caherline was both Mayor of Limerick and Sheriff of County Limerick (the only time on record¹²), and Joseph Gabbett was Sheriff of Limerick City.¹³

Caherconlish Estate

In June 1866, the Caherconlish estate of Charles Monck Wilson¹⁴ was sold in the Landed Estates Court in Dublin. Croker Barrington bought the estate in trust for Daniel Gabbett,¹⁵ thus Caherconlish House would become Gabbett's residence until his death in 1898.¹⁶

Numerous attempts were made to sell the estate from the 1880s onwards, and it was named frequently in the reports of 'Land Cases' brought before the courts from the 1890s until its eventual purchase in 1906. While the main reasons for the



High Park House

(Artist's impression courtesy of Michael O'Halloran)

attempted sale of the estate and the legal intricacies underpinning it deserve a more thorough exploration; in short, it arose from indentures in c.1860 between the then proprietor Charles Monck Wilson and others concerning marriage arrangements, land leases, debts outstanding, funds to be made available for family spinsters and so on. This became common practice in landed estates and was especially prevalent during the late nineteenth century, when many of these families found themselves to near bankruptcy. These indentures, coupled with Gabbett's own debts, made the sale of the estate inevitable.

The following is the account of the Gabbett estate advertised for sale in 1883:¹⁷

This lot forms a beautiful and compact estate, and a most desirable investment. The mansion-house of Caherconlish, with out-offices, is in the very best order, and has all the requisites for a gentleman's mansion of the first class. A considerable sum has been recently spent on the house. There is a walled-in garden, and the demesne lands and wood and ornamental plantation adjoin. Any gentleman desiring a first-class residence within easy distance of the City of Limerick will find this peculiarly convenient and desirable.

There are 220 acres which, with the exception of the portion under wood adjoining the mansion, are either in hands or let on grazing lettings expiring at the end of the season, as stated in rental, and the land being of the prime quality, and highly valued and sought after in the neighbourhood, there is no difficulty in re-letting either on temporary or permanent lettings. The mansion-house is at present occu-

pied by a quarterly tenant, who is bound to give immediate possession on a quarter's notice. The lands and woods adjoining, consisting of about 205 acres, are in the owner's hands, and the purchaser will get immediate possession thereof.

The wood near the mansion-house is stocked with old and handsome valuable timber, and there are also ornamental plantations on other parts of the estate.

The estate is situated in a first-class hunting-district, regularly hunted by the County Limerick foxhounds. And Caherconlish is one of the regular meets.

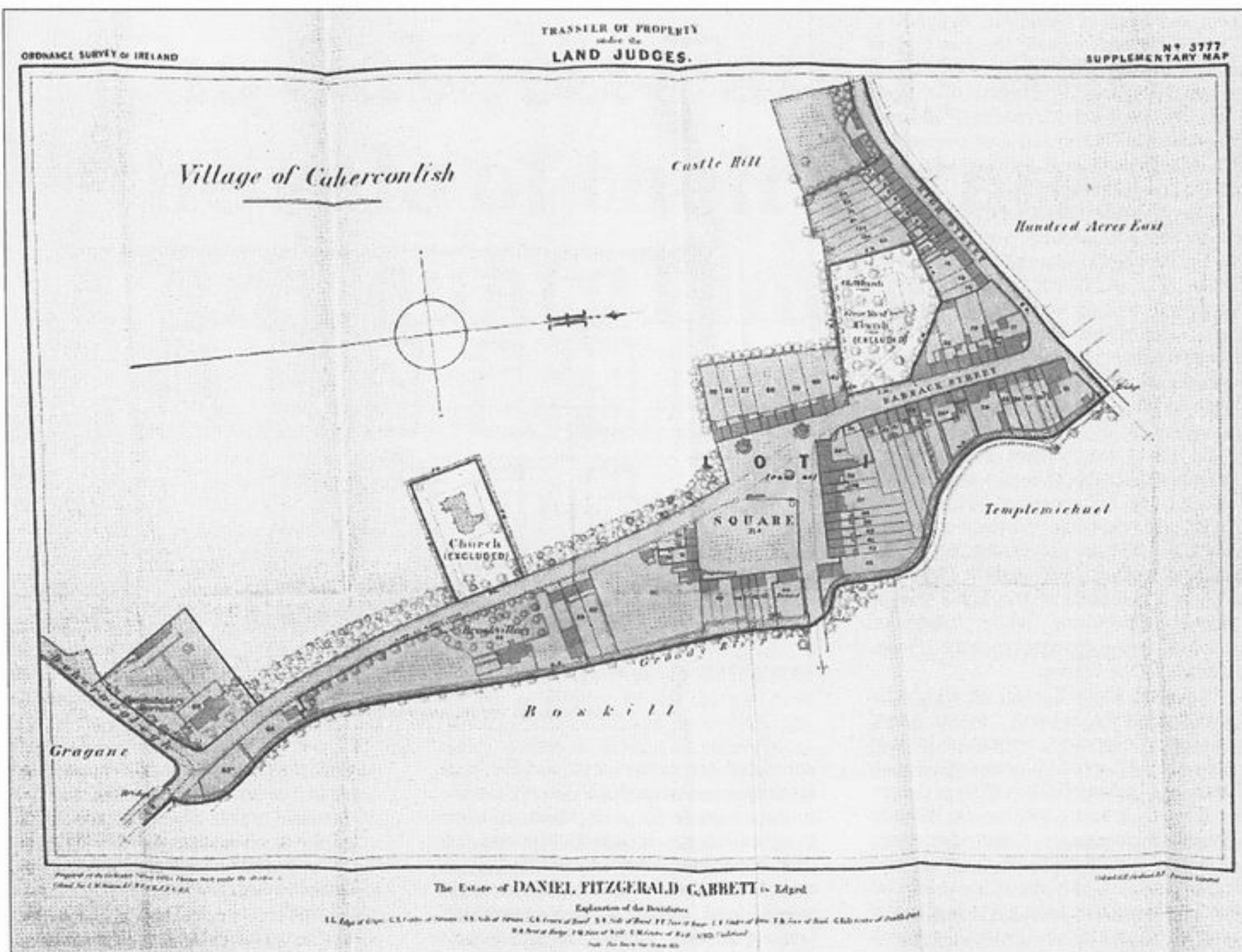
The lands of Knockroe (Wilson), Knockroe, Pust South, Newtown, and Gragane, adjoining and contiguous to the lands of Caherconlish, form the remainder of this Lot, and the tenants therein are solvent and respectable.

A large portion of the village of Caherconlish is also comprised in the estate, and the owner spent some thousands of pounds within recent years in rebuilding and improving the same. There is a valuable bog on the townland of Gragane, and the letting of the turf-banks brings in a considerable income.

Estate Tenants

In order to highlight the precarious nature of some tenants and the more secure leases of others, details are included below. The same families resided on these lands as tenants in 1851 during Griffith's Valuation.

Tenants of High St in Caherconlish village included Revd John Power and Michael Ryan, who were 'year to year' tenants, while Margaret Hartnett, Thomas



Gabbett Caherconlish Estate Map 1883

(Courtesy of Limerick Archives)

Conway, Patrick Kearney and others were tenants 'from week to week'.

Tenants of The Square (Caherconlish village) included Lawrence Heffernan, William Nelligan, Edmund O'Keefe, Michael Ryan and Daniel Guiry, all tenants from 'from week to week'. Others, such as Catherine FitzGibbon, Thomas Murnane, Patrick Boland and William Ahern, held 'year to year' tenancy agreements. The representatives of Michael Murnane and Denis Murnane held leases from 1864 and 1872 from Charles Monck Wilson and Daniel Gabbett respectively.

Barrack Street tenants included Michael Murnane, John Bourke, John Ryan and Joseph Cahill, who all held leases 'from year to year'. One Barrack Street tenant, Michael Lynch, held a lease for the term of 99 years from Daniel Gabbett (dating from 1874); while the representatives of Timothy Ryan and Michael Berkerry held long leases here from Charles Monck Wilson and Thomas Maunsell Wilson respectively.¹⁸

Landed Tenants

The mansion house, gardens and demesne of Caherconlish was in the tenure of William Gabbett for a sum of £40 per annum (set quarterly). The purchaser of the estate, it was noted, would be 'entitled to

immediate possession of the Lands'. He also held Knockroe Wilson, Pust South, and the wood and bog on the estate. In total, over 202 acres¹⁹ were in Gabbett's own hands. Smaller holdings on the estate included Charles Ahern (20 a.), John Fleming (23 a.) John O'Donnell (30 a.), Richard Keays (32 a.), Daniel Lynch (34 a.) and John Guinane (45 a.). Larger holdings included Michael Nash (71 a.), Thomas Glasheen (64 a.), Thomas Power (91 a.) and the representatives of Alley Keays, a widow (129 a.). Many of these tenants and their siblings, with both small and larger holdings, were beneficiaries after the sale of the estate in 1906.²⁰

The High Park estate of Revd Joseph Gabbett and Joseph Gabbett (Robert Donough O'Brien is named as Petitioner) was finally brought before the Landed Estates Court on 26 April 1872. In the months leading up to the sale (noting that this was a turbulent period) it was described as being 'let to peaceable, improving, and respectable tenants who pay their rents regularly'.²¹

The estate, which was held in fee and sold in six lots – was purchased by Mr William Fry in trust for the Revd Joseph Gabbett for £30,000. The particulars of the sale are as follows:

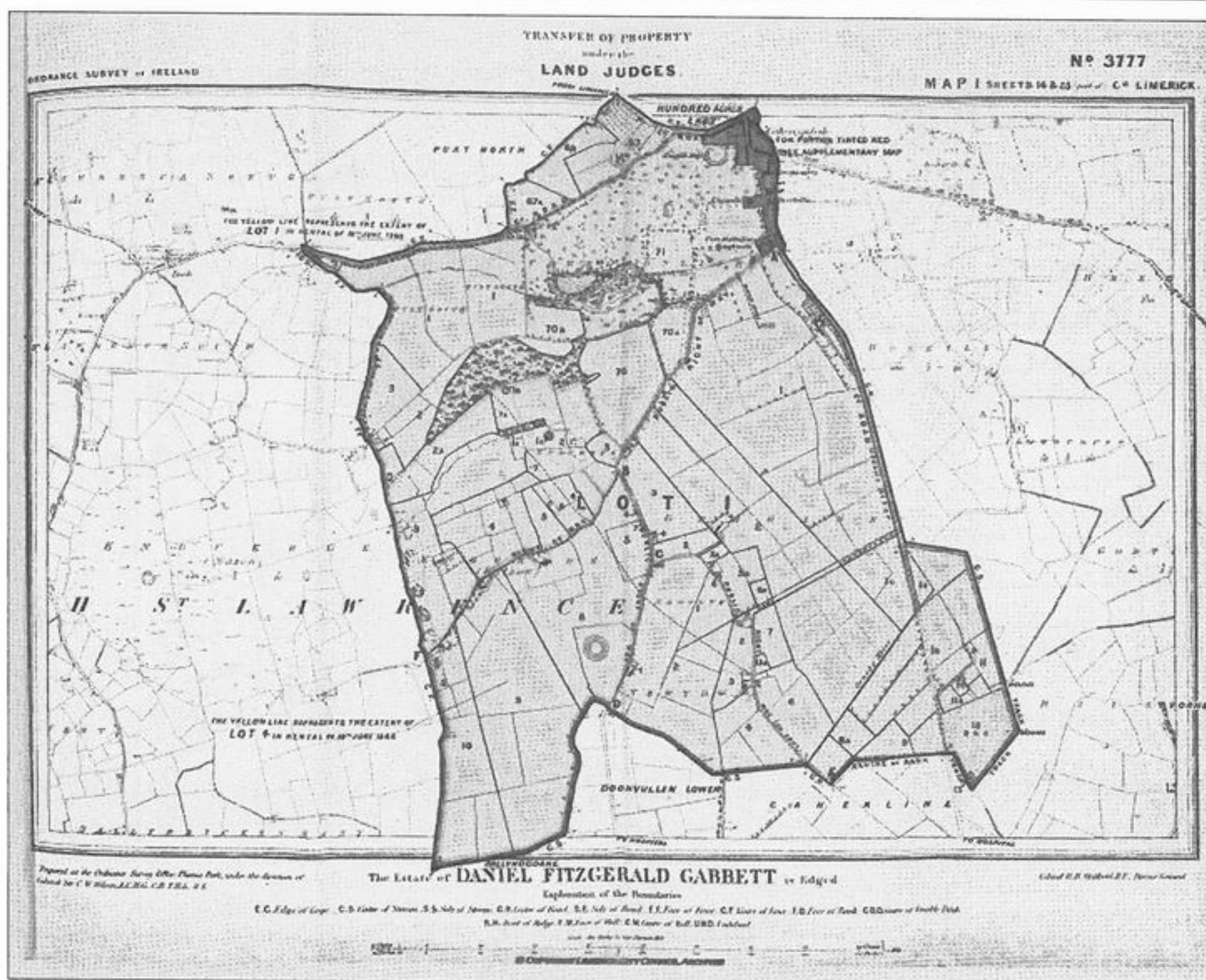
Lot 1, part of High Park townland (175 acres, rental, £276), purchased for £7,750.

Lot 2, part of High Park (215 acres, rental, £332), purchased for £8,750. Lots 3–6, the lands of High Park, Anglode and Skahard (328 acres, rental, £448), purchased for £13,550.²²

The tenants on the High Park estate rented moderately large holdings from Joseph Gabbett. In 1851, there were (in different townlands) approximately seventeen tenants on the estate. From these tenants, John Kennedy and Timothy Harty were the largest landholders with 108 and 104 acres respectively. Other tenants on the estate included William and Patrick Connell, Michael and Patrick O'Brien, William Chamberlain, John Heavener, Honoria Kennedy (High Park), Richard and James Meade (Skahard). Kennedy and Harty also held lands in Skahard and Anglode respectively.²³ Some of these tenants would become recipients of these properties from the Land Commission after they purchased the estate.

Sale of Caherconlish Estate

Daniel Fitzgerald Gabbett's Caherconlish estate was named in numerous newspaper reporting of the 'Land Cases' brought before Land Judges in the Dublin courts from the 1880s onwards. When it was initially advertised for sale in 1883 (and subsequently), it was continually stated that, 'There



Gabbett Caherconlish Estate Map 1883

(Courtesy of Limerick Archives)

being no bidding the sale was adjourned'.²⁴ When it was finally purchased in 1906, the newspaper report, observing the importance of this sale, ran the following:

The Estate Commissioners under the Land Purchasing Act have purchased two properties in the County Limerick for allocation among evicted tenants (one being Mount Shannon estate near the city, the residence of the first Lord Clare), and the other the lands and village of Caherconlish, and known as the Gabbett Estate. The latter includes the residence of the late Mr Gabbett M.P., which was renovated some years back at an outlay of some five thousand pounds, and which with the demesne lands was in the markets for years without a purchaser. It also includes the village of Caherconlish, most of the houses in which were built by Mr Gabbett, and these have been bought by the Commissioners at 12 and a half years' purchase.

The buying of the demesne lands and village of Caherconlish by the Commissioners – as it apparently was the first venture of its kind since the Land Commission Act had come into operation – had

been the subject of much discussion and disagreement. A complaint had been made on Saturday 14 July 1906 at the meeting of the evicted Tenants' Association 'that the house and some demesne lands at Caherconlish were given to a person, not a labourer or evicted tenant, and that planters were being imported into the Mount Shannon estate'. The tenants arranged to communicate with the county members of Parliament on the subject and voice their concerns.

Meanwhile, allotment plots of one or two acres were being granted to the labourers and residents in Caherconlish village at a considerably reduced rent, the houses and allotments not paying more than was formerly paid for the houses free of land. It was pointed out that while the Estate Commissioners had only recently purchased the Gabbett estate and that the allocation of the land had 'been necessarily slow through various causes', the greater portion of the Caherconlish demesne lands had been allocated the previous week.²⁵

Effects of the Sale on Tenants

The eventual purchase of the Gabbett estate and distribution of these lands was reported at the time as being 'all important

to the unfortunate wounded soldiers of the land war'. It was further noted that the Limerick and Clare Evicted Tenants' Association should meet more often than they previously had done (once a month was suggested), because it was feared that 'if the tenants lose the land now they will lose it for all time'. These were anxious times for the Gabbett (and other) tenants before the purchase and the securing of these lands in their favour: 'Future Governments', it was suggested at the time, 'cannot be expected to make lands, so that if the agents and their friends manage to secure any of the untenanted lands that are now under consideration, it will be to the loss of the evicted tenants and labourers alike'. Therefore, the sale of the Gabbett lands was 'an example of what may be accomplished by persistent agitation' by those tenants and labourers.²⁶ Some fifty labourers got allotments of two statute acres each, and seven others got plots varying from one acre to an acre and a half. Another thirty-four acres was parcelled out amongst the residents of the locality.

Two central characters in this story were the Revd Father Hanly, P.P., and Mr William Lundon M.P., to whom 'most of the success attending the disposal of this property is due, they having worked per-



Caherline House, Lisnagry

sistently in the cause of the labourers for a long time past.' While it was a long and hard struggle, it was noted at the time that this 'victory should give encouragement to those other labourers and evicted tenants who are yet to be dealt with, to persevere in the fight for their just rights'.²⁷

The Gabbetts, like the majority of the landed class, had come in to their vast Irish estates during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but were departed again by the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, they and their class – indirectly through the mismanagement of their estates – left behind a legacy of reform in the shape of the progressive land laws enforced after 1870, which saw many of these estates turned over to their former tenants. Not all tenants felt the effects of these sweeping reforms. Some contentious problems remained: such as the exclusion of some tenants from land grants, small tenant farmers who felt they should have got larger holdings, and those aggrieved by 'outsiders' brought in from other estates, inside and outside of Limerick, to settle on these lands.

'The evicted tenants' of the Gabbett estate were advised at the time to 'keep their demands continually before the proper authorities so as to leave no loophole to those gentlemen to overlook even a single claimant'. However, the conduct of some of the more affluent sub-letting Catholic tenants by way of securing more lands during this period left a bitter legacy that still resonates.²⁸

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- 1 *Limerick Chronicle*, 17 July 1906.
- 2 Anon., *Gabbett Family: Genealogy* (Limerick, c.1377), p. 6.
- 3 Seamus Pender (ed.), *A Census of Ireland Circa 1659: With Essential Materials from the Poll Money Ordinances 1660–1661* (Dublin, 2002), p. 274.
- 4 Report on the Gabbett Papers of Caherline from 1666 (No. 171, MSS., National Library, Ireland); Landed Estates Database [<http://landed-estates.nuigalway.ie/>].
- 5 Robert G. Maunsell, *History of Maunsell, or Mansell and of Crayford, Gabbett, Knoyle, Persse, Toler, Waller, Castletown; Waller, Prior Park; Warren, White, Winthrop and Mansell of Guernsey* (Cork, 1903), p. 95; Gabbett's Will was proved in 1691 (*Genealogy*, p. 7).
- 6 *Acts of Settlement and Explanation* (Dublin, 1825), p. 69.
- 7 Beryl, P. Eustace (ed.), *Registry of Deeds Dublin, Abstract of Wills, vol. i, 1708–1745* (Dublin, 1956), p. 229.
- 8 *Genealogy*, p. 7.
- 9 Hugh Montgomery-Massingberd (ed.), *Burke's Irish Family Records* (London, 1976), p. 455; *Genealogy*, p. 7.
- 10 Richard Griffith, *Griffith's Valuation of Ireland* (Dublin, 1851).
- 11 U. H. Hussey de Burgh, *The Landowners of Ireland [1878]* (Dublin, 1878), p. 173.
- 12 *Genealogy*, pp 8–9.
- 13 Maurice Lenihan, *History of Limerick* (Limerick, 1866); pp 704–08, pp 744–46; Matthew Potter, *Limerick City Council 1197–2014: A Retrospective* (Limerick, 2014), pp 42–45.
- 14 The old Burke estate was granted to Ralph Wilson in 1666.
- 15 Daniel (1841–98) was third son of Daniel Gabbett of Strand House and his wife Susanna FitzGerald of Ballinard (*Genealogy*, pp 11–12).
- 16 *Limerick Chronicle*, 21 June 1866.
- 17 The estate was sold in 2 Lots; the second part (160 a.) was in Ballybricken East in the parishes of Inch St Lawrence and Caherelly.
- 18 Rental, Maps and Particulars of property owned by Daniel Fitzgerald Gabbett in Caherconlish ... and Ballybricken East, for sale under the High Court, Land Judges, 23 November 1883 (Limerick Archives); Landed Estates' Court Rentals (O'Brien), Gabbett, 26 Apr 1872, vol., 105 (57), MRGS 39/049 (microfilm copy in NUIG, Special Collections).
- 19 All land is measured in Statute acres.
- 20 Landed Estates' Court Rentals [1883].
- 21 *Limerick Chronicle*, 25 April 1872.
- 22 *Irish Times*, 27 April 1872; *Limerick Chronicle*, 27 April 1872.
- 23 Griffith's Valuation, (pp 19–31).
- 24 *Limerick Chronicle*, 24 November 1883.
- 25 *Irish Times*, 16 July 1906; *Limerick Chronicle*, 17 July 1906.
- 26 *Limerick Leader*, 16 July 1906.
- 27 *Ibid*, 16 July 1906.
- 28 *Ibid*, 16 July 1906.