Ireland - The Bread Basket of Britain

by Jennifer Levey

Although some 350,000 Irishmen fought in the Great War, arguably Ireland’s greatest contribution to the war effort was through food supplies. The country had a tradition of being the breadbasket of Britain, and this was especially true during turbulent wartime. After conscription was introduced in mainland Britain in 1916, farmhands and labourers were in short supply, and with an army marching on its stomach, Ireland’s fertile soil and comparably adequate number of farm workers immediately became an invaluable commodity for the Crown.

Not only was it incumbent on Irish farmers to supply Britain but also other Allies in urgent need of supplies, most notably France and Italy. A conference held in Belfast in 1916 demonstrates the sheer volume being exported out of the country for the war effort, where on this occasion 50,000 tonnes of oats and a large quantity of potatoes were shipped to Italy, with similar large purchase to follow for the French.

In normal circumstances this level of support for the Allies would be sustainable; however, anomalies in weather conditions in late 1915 through to 1917 put considerable pressure on Ireland’s agricultural capabilities. Wet weather, coupled with a limited supply of copper sulphate and carbonate of soda used for spraying potatoes, resulted in an outbreak of potato blight. This poor crop had a knock-on effect on other vital industries, especially pork production. Food prices reached unprecedented levels and with the Famine still etched in peoples’ memories, a sense of unease began to spread.

At a meeting of Limerick County Committee of Agriculture and Technical Instruction in early 1916, a Mr. A. Mackey, called attention to the exportation of oats and drew comparisons to the Famine where Ireland had been ‘denuded’ of food, men and money. In addition, the meeting resolved a possible solution would be to increase tillage, with agricultural instructors to be recruited to give lectures in how to achieve this on existing farms throughout the country area. Another meeting of note was held by the U.I.L, AOH, IL and LA a month later, where it was resolved to demand from local ranchers, sufficient land for tillage. It was claimed that the situation, for some labouring men and their families, was ‘approaching famine’. It was proposed that one quarter to a half acre should be made available to labouring men, at a reasonable price, to keep them from starvation.

However compulsory tillage was not introduced under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) until 1917 where a 10% increase of tilled land was required for farmers with land exceeding ten acres.

It is important to examine how these conditions came about, and although bad weather in early 1916 was a large contributor to the poor potato yield, delaying suitable conditions for planting, other factors played a significant role. In March 1916 a circular letter issued by the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction of Ireland (DATI) highlighted a shortage of sulphuric acid due to demands from the Ministry of Munitions. This shortage impacted the production of copper sulphate used in potato spraying, so much so, that the issue of export licenses were suspended temporarily. However the DATI warned that licenses could not be suspended for long as the Allies were also in short supply.

This warning had followed a Board of Trade letter issued to the DATI three weeks earlier marked as ‘pressing’. It advised Irish farmers to purchase all stocks of copper sulphate required for the coming season immediately. The Board advised that prices were unlikely to fall and expected to rise further as demand far outweighed supply. They did highlight however the vital importance of spraying the crops despite the escalated prices.

Despite the warning issued months before, the Board of Trade was forced to reiterate the message in May to the DATI in a letter airing their frustrations about Irish farmers’ reluctance to acquire the copper sulphate in good time, complaining how they had been, ‘endeavouring to create surplus of copper of sulphate since January’ however the ‘present accumulation and apparent apathy of Irish agriculture interests’ caused the Board to consider the exportation of 1,000 of the 3,500 tonnes available. The French and Italians needed it more urgently as spraying usually takes place earlier than in Ireland.

However, the Board appeared to have not taken into account the difficulty farmers may have had paying for the required amount at the increased price. In June Mr. O’Sullivan put a question to Mr. Russell, president of the DATI, reported in the Limerick Chronicle, whether spraying had been partly abandoned due to the increased cost of materials. Mr. Russell retorted that there had been ongoing communications with both the Board and the Ministry of Munitions since February and the Department maintained they were in no position to regulate prices.

Due to the bad weather and lack lustre spraying of the crop, the harvest was adversely affected, in a year when supplies were needed most. The crop report issued by the DATI in October 1916 did not make for cheerful reading.

The potato crop was described as ‘a very medium crop with a large population small and diseased’. This was attributed to ‘lateness of planting, combined with early outbreak of blight, allowing too little time for growth, and owing to this cause, except where two sprays were given, yields are very poor’.

However, Mr T. W. Russell, Liberal MP for Tyrone West and president of
DATI, was adamant that spraying was maintained even in the poorest parts of Ireland. Despite this claim the potato crop was estimated to be 33% to 50% less than 1915, and the area under potatoes reduced by 8,000 acres from the previous year. Russell was asked to recommend prohibition of export for that year, but he advised that the Department had no such power, and besides there was little or no surplus for this purpose.

By October reports of a serious hike in prices for potatoes was reported. Instances in Athlone, Midleton and Roscommon saw potatoes rise to a shilling per stone, having been set at 8d per stone before the war, two years previously. The crop in Tipperary was badly affected with disease in up to nine out of ten cases. In Carrick-on-Suir, the Board of Guardians reported that a contractor requested that his contract be cancelled as his price was fixed at 9d per stone and since potatoes had risen to 1s per stone 'he could not procure the required supply of potatoes'. Mr T. W. Russell's statement was referenced again. Careful watchfulness was encouraged. It was highlighted that there was a high proportion of small tubers, as well as a notable percentage of diseased ones. It was recorded that on wet and exposed land yield was most affected especially in cases where spraying was neglected or imperfectly done; the situation would not be regarded as serious if weather conditions were normal.

England and Scotland were also affected, which restricted the amount of potatoes available for domestic requirements throughout the UK. There was also a shortage across the Channel which may have stimulated exportation. The Department reiterated that they had no power to prohibit exportation or fix prices. However, Russell did issue guidelines to conserve the existing crop. These included; not feeding pigs with potatoes suitable for human consumption, sort potatoes into pits to eliminate any rotting and diseased tubers, take special care with potatoes suitable for seed, refrain from exporting potatoes from districts where there is no surplus to local requirements and finally for towns, increased growing of potatoes in gardens and allotments was recommended e.g. schemes conducted by the Vacant Land Cultivation Society in Dublin and Belfast.

An unforeseen repercussion of the poor potato yield was the knock-on effect it had on the pork industry. It was reported in the Limerick Chronicle that; 'young pigs have dropped greatly in price owing to a falling off in demand due to the prospect of a small supply of potatoes for feeding.

Of course Limerick was home to several bacon curers of world renown such as Matterson's, O'Mara's, and Shaw's and the war impacted on Limerick's bacon trade. Negatively in the main, although Denny's won substantial war contracts to supply the British Army. Adult pigs, as with all animal stock were rising in price, and there were fewer young pigs being reared in Limerick to replace them, due to the cost of potatoes. Higher prices available in England, discouraged farmers from selling their animals in Limerick. This proved devastating for the curing industry as the export of pigs grew. In 1914, 57,000 pigs were exported, rising to 100,000 in 1915, with the trend continuing to 145,000 for just the first eight months of 1916.

Potatoes were not the only crop that suffered due to the adverse weather conditions during this period. Heavy rains in November 1915 made it difficult to sow wheat; therefore no crops could be sown after the end of October due to heavy rains throughout the winter. Spring wheat was sown only in the last week of January. February and March were very severe so there was no sowing during these months. The sowing of barley and oats was also delayed until springtime. Potatoes, usually sown in April, were not sown until the third week in May. Rainfall in winter and spring was estimated to be the heaviest in twenty years and temperatures remained low right up until June. All summer crops were three to six weeks late being planted. Potato sprouts appeared to be very weak. Spring wheat was only medium sized and from a grazing perspective, pastures, especially in low lying fields, were patchy and thin.

The Crop Report published in October by the DATI, although not devastating, did raise concerns that a frugal winter would follow and the surplus relied upon for export to the front, would be negligible. The Limerick Chronicle provided a breakdown of the report outlining the yields in the following essential crops; wheat produced a good average yield despite a slow start. Oats were good in the south where early sowing was possible, but was described as poor in other regions, 'in some districts...estimated produce...half'. Barley was deemed 'satisfactory', while rye fared 'fairly well'. Root crops such as carrots and parsnips were said to show; 'average promise' while flax was reported to be, 'below last year'. Straw was lighter than usual, and although the pastures appeared of a reasonable standard, ground was soft which resulted in the straw being of poor feeding quality due to the excessive rain.

Although these yields seem to be far more encouraging than previously predicted, they were not sufficient to provide supplies for the Allies' needs. Much of what was reaped was exported for the war effort, causing shortages and soaring prices in Ireland.

However, 1916 was not a complete wash-out as there was a brief respite in late July and early August, when a heatwave struck the west. A Kilrush correspondent for the Limerick Chronicle reported that such weather had not been experienced for many years, and that a
surplus to Army requirements could be released under licence, the holders of which could sell the released forage up to the War Department’s maximum price.

A statement issued to Sir Thomas Esmonde, MP for North Wexford in August, directed that in his constituency the ‘prime’ first crop of hay was required for overseas shipment and not for home consumption, became commonplace. The department proposed releasing upland and other meadow hay for civil use where large quantities were reportedly available in Wexford. 16

By October 1916 discussions began in the hope of addressing rising food prices and the dissatisfaction at the government’s reluctance to intervene. The government was called upon to impose conditions on wholesale and retail dealers to ensure customers receive reasonable prices. Mercantile requirements were driving prices up as widespread shortages resulted. The lack of men available for dock work as winter approached was also a concern and congestion was expected in the harbours and the railways. It had been suggested that less necessary products be restricted. 17

Limerick Harbour, which had played an essential role in the local economy throughout the previous century, was badly affected by the Great War. The threat of German submarines on the west coast became a very serious concern after the Atrannmore of the Clyde Steamship Co. was sunk, conveying bacon from Limerick to Glasgow, in March 1916. 18 Commercial shippers were reluctant to use western ports after the incident which had a knock-on effect on imports and exports alike.

The fact that Limerick was dogged by a lack of labourers, further contributed to the demise of the harbour. Although many dockers had joined the fighting in France, many regular labourers had left the city to find work elsewhere, generally to larger cities in the UK and as a result the efficiency and reliability of the harbour industry in Limerick suffered. Boats that would have generally taken no longer than 24 hours to unload were by 1916, taking up to four to five days. Panicked owners warned that vessels would have to bypass Limerick in the future should these delays continue. Coal merchants suggested erecting a crane in the docks to alleviate the labour shortage, but objections were raised for fear it would permanently replace jobs for men who would return home after the war. 19

The Corporation, Harbour Board, Trades Council, various interested merchants and dock labourers had become acutely aware of the issues affecting Limerick Harbour in February when they convened to discuss the ongoing problem. Figures revealed the alarming decrease in cargo coming through the harbour, down by 8,000 tons of imports from the previous year. The Limerick Harbour Board committee presided over by J. P. Goodbody proposed cuts to make the harbour more financially viable. It was agreed that savings could be made with regard to lighting, maintenance and police presence. A means of increasing income was suggested through charging dues for imports at a higher scale and also tonnage dues for coaling vessels to be raised, however it became clear that neither of these ideas would induce ships to dock in Limerick. 20 Making it more expensive for the vessel owners and merchants would not be conducive to increasing trade, especially when in competition with both Cork and Waterford, where unloading time was considerably less.

Limerick, with its strong milling tradition, had relied heavily on the

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17. The Old Limerick Journal Volume 50 2016

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Advertisement poster for Matterson’s of Limerick. (Courtesy of Limerick Museum)

'large and plentiful crop' was expected. Even cases of sunstroke were reported. 16 Unfortunately, such a limited period of good weather could only narrowly improve what had come before it, apart from one specific crop which benefitted greatly from the sunshine: hay.

Before this development the government had passed a resolution on June 30 commandeering the entire crop of hay in Ireland that year. This mandate was issued under an Order, from the War Department under the Defence of the Realm Act, listing not only hay, but also all oat and wheat straw grown in Ireland. The only respite was that it did not affect the balance of 1915 crops. Farmers and stockholders were only permitted to retain 'normal' quantities of forage for animals, and could not dispose of crops unless to the Military authorities. Licences were to be obtained from the District Purchasing Officer of the district in which the crop stood. For Limerick and all of Munster applications were to be sent to No. 6 Lapp's Quay in Cork. 16

The War Office was intent on buying the bulk of good quality seeds and a large quantity of straw. Prices were set until the 31 December for seeds, oats and wheat straw, after this date a drying allowance was to be charged; 5% for January, 10% for February and so on. Beaters were supplied by the Army authorities, but vendors were required to pay for rail carriage up to a maximum of 10 shillings per tonne. Hay and straw

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Postcard for Clyde Shipping Co. (Courtesy of Limerick Museum)
harbour to transport wheat, having mainly imported American produce. However, with the decline of the harbour, supplies of wheat were far less than required and shortages of flour were reported in several parts of Ireland during the war. Restrictions on trading distances due to fuel shortages also had a detrimental effect on the milling industry. Depots all over Munster and Connaught lay idle for the most part of the war because of transport issues; however the millers attempted to overcome these obstacles by renovating previously derelict country mills which lay close by. The DATI encouraged these efforts to make areas self-sufficient. Despite the best efforts of the milling industry to maintain 'business as usual', by the summer of 1916 the Stewart's biscuit factory at Bedford Row in Limerick had cut nearly a hundred jobs.

Severe sugar shortages were also an issue as discussed at a meeting of the Limerick Harbour Commissioners where the point was raised that only one consignment of sugar had been received into the port since the beginning of the war despite having been one of the chief distributing centres previously. Ports such as Cork and Dublin continued to receive a regular supply, but in Limerick prices were rising to an exorbitant level due to shortages.

Building work in Limerick had all but disappeared by the start of the war, following the trend throughout Ireland and Britain, and the pressure of high prices and high unemployment hit the ordinary workers and the poor especially hard, making the city quite a sombre place during this period. It was even highlighted by a letter, written to the Limerick Leader in November 1916, claiming that due to prohibitive food prices starvation would be imminent for workers in the city during the coming winter. To demonstrate the reality of this threat an appeal was made to readers to donate all they could to the local Fuel and Blanket Fund which was used to supplement the poor of Limerick.

It was reported in the Limerick Chronicle in the same week that potatoes had risen from 7 shillings to 22 shillings per barrel in some parts of the country. The price in Limerick remained at 1s 8d per stone in comparison to an average of 8d in previous years, and although at a Nationalist Party meeting in London the same week an appeal was made to the government to prohibit any further exportation, Mr. Forrester stated in the House of Commons that he, 'was seriously considering the question of whether the government should commandeer what potatoes they require'.

Sinn Fein's interpretation of what was fast becoming a food crisis was that England was engineering another famine by commandeering as many crops as the war effort required, at the expense of the Irish people. A writer to the Limerick Leader in November expanded on this view, citing his suspicions that, by failing to provide Ireland with its fair share of foodstuffs, Britain was conspiring, 'by the effective method of [either] starving or joining the army'. This was in response to initial hopes of securing munitions contracts being dashed earlier in the year, as neighbours Galway, Waterford and Cork received national shell factories, whilst Limerick was overlooked. Emmet O'Connor suggests in his publication, A Labour History of Ireland that this was a deliberate ploy by Unionist and British, whereby 'employer determination to freeze nationalism out of lucrative war contracts kept the south de-industrialised'. It appeared that Limerick had been also singled out in a negative light in the previous year when postal restrictions were imposed on the city. These perceived needless restrictions bred distrust and frustration in the people. The Limerick City Division of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) protested in a meeting held in March, against the curtailment of postal and telegraph facilities in Limerick, as we believe there is no urgent necessity for it, and as such retribution is likely to operate adversely against trade and general interests of the city.

All these factors combined, contributed to the unease experienced by the Irish populace, especially in urban areas, where food and fuel prices continued to soar. Meanwhile the DATI persevered in commandeering any supplies so that the food prices remained out of many workers' reach and there were little or no opportunities to earn extra money in Limerick. Despite appeals from the people to retain more of the crop and halt further exportation, the government ignored their pleas, which certainly fanned the flame of discontent in towns and cities not earmarked to benefit from the war's munitions factories.

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