

# The Onset of Famine: County Clare, 1845-1846

by Ciarán Ó Murchadha

**O**n 18 September, 1845, as the ravages caused by a previously unknown species of blight on the potato crop continued to send a ripple of alarm throughout Ireland, the *Clare Journal* sought to reassure its readers about the situation. Its own investigation, it revealed, had shown that apart from failures in worn-out ground, those potatoes already dug were 'both productive and good' and the harvest promised to be 'fully an average crop'. In any case, it concluded, judgement should be suspended until the main crop was dug out towards the end of October.<sup>(1)</sup>

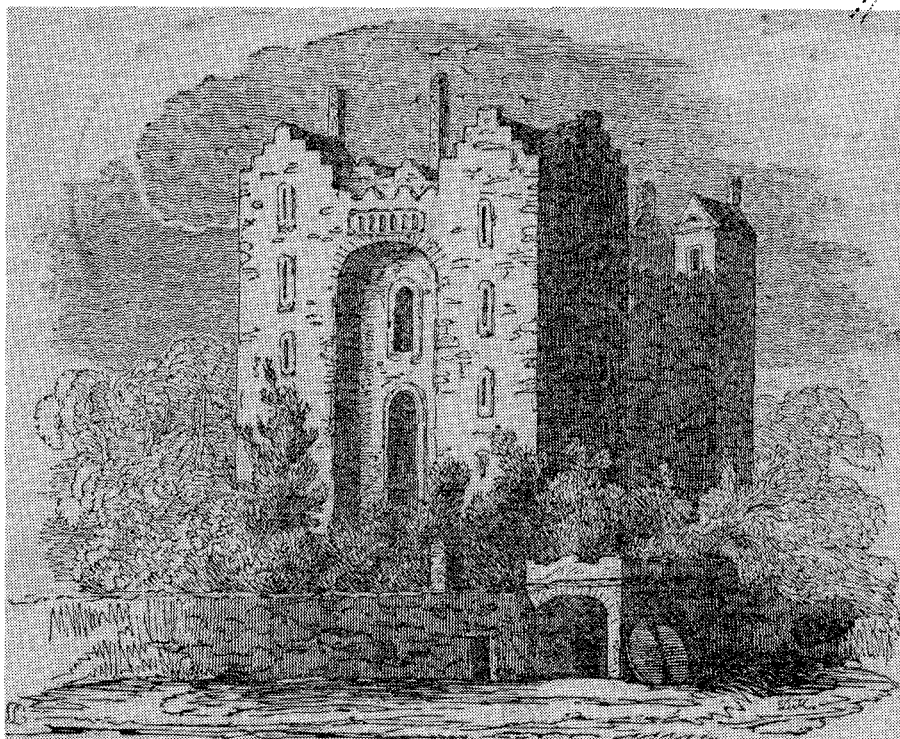
Well before this deadline, however, the reasoned optimism displayed by the editor, John B. Knox, gave way to a deep despondency, with the realisation that as the crop was being harvested, a national calamity was unfolding:

*While hope remained or prospects were doubtful we forbore to damp the minds of our countrymen on this awful topic ... canker is not partial but general and ... an early and prolonged famine will be the consequence unless immediate measures are taken if not to avert, at least to mitigate the calamity.<sup>(2)</sup>*

Notorious for its vulnerability to climate, the annual arrival of the main potato crop in October was always greeted with a certain anxiety. Previous failures resulting from frost and wet had caused great distress in Clare, the worst recent incidence being in 1822, when numbers of people had starved to death in the barony of Ibrickan. At that time, only assistance from a private London committee and the arrival of a good harvest had prevented mass mortality in the county.<sup>(3)</sup> The seasons immediately preceding 1845 had also been extremely difficult.<sup>(4)</sup> The extent of the current failure was, however, without parallel.

Despite its unprecedented scale, the effects of the 1845 failure were often extremely localised. Thus while the extensive acreage planted by Rev. Henry Murphy, the Church of Ireland incumbent in Ennis, escaped entirely, most gardens in the vicinity of the town were devastated. Different areas within the parish of Quin seem to have been unaffected,<sup>(5)</sup> while on the other hand, places as far apart as Newmarket, Scariff and Kilfenora were severely hit.

Local estimates of the extent of the



Bunratty Castle. Drawing by Samuel Lover for the *Irish Penny Magazine*.

potato failure in Clare tallied broadly with official ones: just over 40 per cent of the crop had been destroyed.<sup>(6)</sup> Of the county's potato growing regions, the baronies of Inchiquin and Upper Bunratty were very extensively affected, while parts of Burren and Corcomroe suffered hardly at all.<sup>(7)</sup> However, unlike many other counties which fared better in relation to the harvest, the potato crop in Clare was discovered to be rotten as it was dug, and the loss made it certain that distress would occur on a more extensive scale in the county than had ever been the case previously and that this would occur before next year's early harvest.

## Remedies and Reactions

Actual want arising out of the failure of the crop would be postponed for some months at least, it was calculated, and perhaps for this reason, discussion at first centred more on the nature of the blight and how it might be controlled, than on palliative action. Many confident suggestions were made, some of them showing a surprising degree of accurate knowledge. In November, the head gardener at Kiltannon<sup>(8)</sup> suggested that dry peat or bog mould would retard putrefaction if mixed with the potatoes, a remedy evidently derived from the widespread belief that the blight was caused by a wet rot. Dr. Evans, the physician at Newmarket-on-

Fergus, suggested that sprinkling different types of lime under certain conditions onto diseased potatoes would stifle the fungus, which he believed, correctly, but against the weight of scholarly opinion, to be responsible for the blight.<sup>(9)</sup> Neither approach, it must be said, had the slightest beneficial effect.

At a slightly later stage one individual in Clare did come tantalizingly close to discovering the remedy which some forty years later became the only successful method of treating blight before modern times. The individual concerned was G.H. Fitzgerald of Kilkee, who after conducting a number of experiments, declared in March of 1846 that potatoes steeped in a solution of bluestone did not develop the disease.<sup>(10)</sup> Although Fitzgerald's method did not in fact, provide a solution to the potato blight, one cannot but be impressed by the level of scientific endeavour which he and Evans brought to bear on the problem.<sup>(11)</sup>

## The Rural Population

All socio-economic groupings who depended for their existence on the land, from landlords to labourers, were affected eventually by the crop failure. A minority of the former reacted with generosity to the crisis. At Kilfenora, one absentee landlord instructed his tenants not to sell their corn, but to store it in case of a

general 'starvation', while James Molony of Kiltannon, sold his best 'cup' and 'crow' potatoes to the people for 1½d. per stone.<sup>(12)</sup> For most landlords, however, the immediate preoccupation was for the continued payment of their rents, and on a longer term, for their personal security should conditions worsen into social disruption, the constant background fear of the Irish landowner.

At the lowest level of society, of course, the smallholders, cottiers and labourers were the only groupings in Clare for whom hunger and disease was a real prospect. And although food would not run out entirely for this sector of the population until early in the next year, already in October, the state of the countryside was being described as 'truly frightful' and the alarm of the people as 'bordering on despair'.<sup>(13)</sup>

The state of mind of both extremes of the rural population in County Clare at this time is perhaps best illustrated by the letter written by a Kilkishen magistrate named Robert Studdert to the Lord Lieutenant in November.<sup>(14)</sup> Studdert's intention in writing was to draw official attention to the restive state of the people of his area brought about by the failure of the potato crop, and which he illustrated by the enclosure with his letter of a notice which had been posted locally. The notice, which he obviously believed to be aimed at himself, began with a reference to the 'present awful crisis and approaching calamity of our native land' and called on the

*aristocracy residing in the county and the representatives of absentee noblemen immediately to come forward, convene meetings, set forth resolutions and make the people sensible how as they intend substituting the loss. Thousands of families are this moment in actual starvation having nothing for the support, unless potatoes infected to such a degree as to be almost refused by swine.*

Unspecified retribution was threatened if assistance were not forthcoming. Studdert was unnerved to be the target of such a threatening notice, a type commonly used in pre-famine Ireland to redress agrarian grievance. Kilkishen was a relatively peaceful district, yet the people there, Studdert wrote, were 'greatly disposed to take advantage of the present partial failure of the potato crop for insurrectionary purposes'.

Already his neighbour, D.J. Wilson of Belvoir, an improving landlord, had to receive police protection.<sup>(15)</sup> And although he, Studdert, was unaware of any case of actual starvation, he knew personally of very many instances of families living on potatoes which were so infected as to be hardly fit for human consumption. His own tenants had refused to pay their rents because they were afraid to sell their corn, which they might later need.

If this were a general occurrence, then the landlords would not be able to afford relief. Neither would they be able to cover

their losses by eviction, since the tenantry would 'oppose to the death any attempt to be dispossessed of their holdings', wanting 'only an excuse to claim the absolute property in what they now have in possession'. The safest way to deal with unrest and ensure payment of rent, he implied, was to placate the tenantry by banning the export of corn and by the provision of employment. There was an abundance of opportunities for public works employment in his own area, particularly in the drainage of land. Above all, the government must state what they were going to do before the people commenced supplying themselves by plundering their neighbours.<sup>(16)</sup>

The use of public works such as those suggested by Robert Studdert was by now a well-established method of government to help an impoverished population over short term subsistence crises, and for which purpose the Board of Works had been specifically created. Both Studdert and the anonymous writer of the notice were clearly familiar with the procedure, as were indeed all social classes in the county. And in fact, the relief measures implemented over the next six months by Peel's government were largely to follow the same well-trodden path, although on a much enlarged scale.

### Meetings and Discussions

From the end of October, there was much public discussion among various bodies as to what should be done. Nearly all of it was fruitless. Officially convened meetings of county cesspayers, who might be expected to pay for relief measures, were held in Ennis on 22 November and 8 December. They too were of the opinion that government should provide public works employment and special relief to the destitute, and on both occasions, forwarded memorials to that effect to government. On 29 October, the Ennis Poor Law Guardians, who would be forced to contract out for diseased potatoes in December,<sup>(17)</sup> held a lengthy discussion on the distress caused by the potato failure, and sent an address with a similar message to the government on the subject.<sup>(18)</sup> On 10 November, the Ennis Town Commissioners took their turn and despatched an almost identical memorial to Sir Robert Peel after a long discussion on the consequences of the potato failure.<sup>(19)</sup> Noticeably absent from all such meetings was the application of any local initiative to the crisis. It would take over another month before the rapid approach of very severe distress forced some coherence on local meetings, and with it the realisation that they would have to initiate action themselves.

Government had already signalled its intention to give official sanction and financial support to local relief meetings,<sup>(20)</sup> and on 10 January, the first such sanctioned meeting in Ireland took place at Kilkee, the centre of an area where hardship was already severe.<sup>(21)</sup> Despite being held with official backing, and with a Board of Works adviser, it was

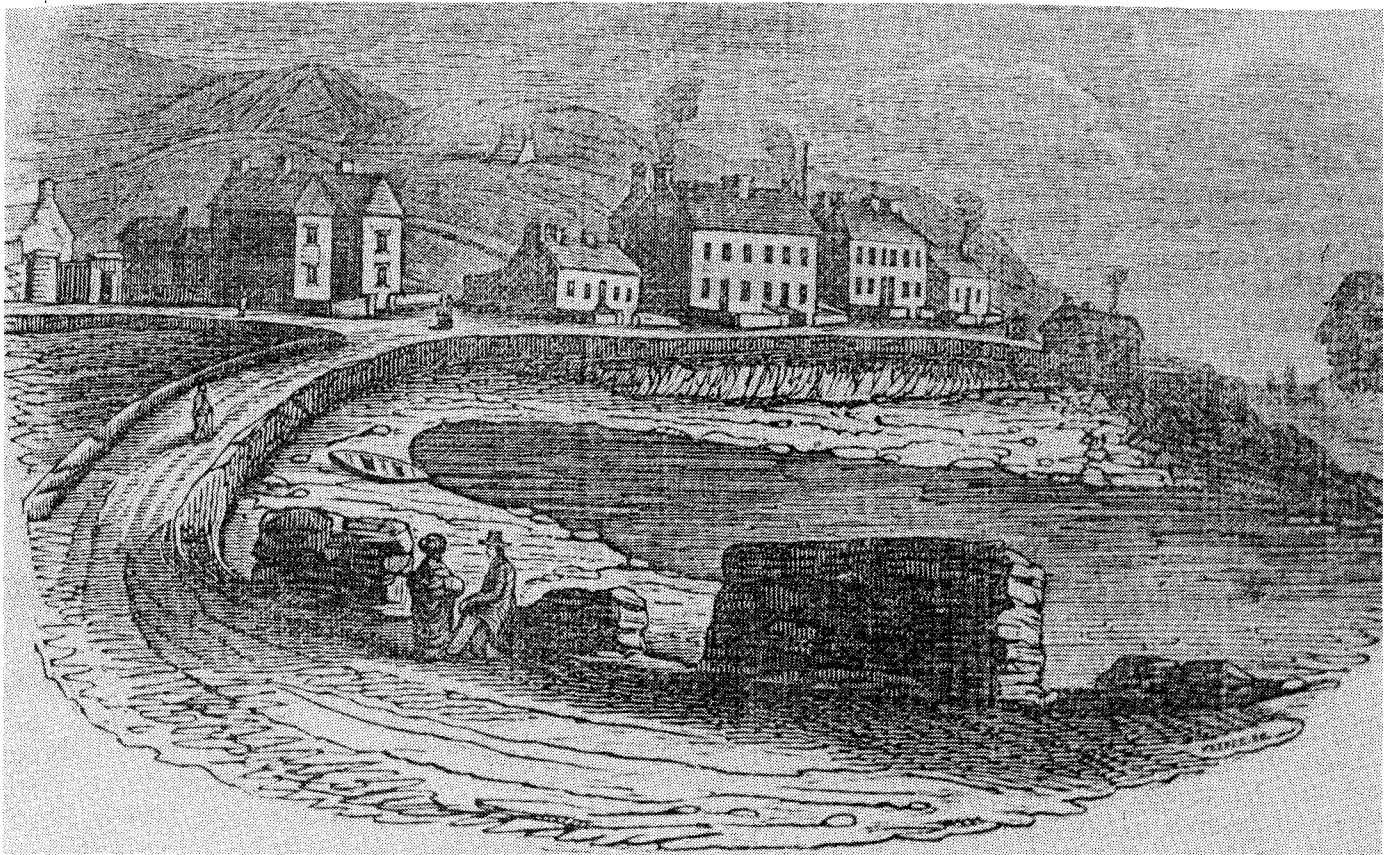
something of a disaster. At the insistence of the magistrates, who were apparently anxious to exclude the supporters of Fr. Comyn, the parish priest, it was held in the tiny Kilkee Billiard Room, and only a fraction of the large crowd who attended were able to gain admittance. A number of local property owners and clergymen from the surrounding area were left outside. Most of the resolutions adopted by this disordered meeting were impractical, wildly outside the range of what officialdom would be willing to grant. Among them were the suggestions that the remainder of the corn harvest be purchased by the government, and that it be stored in warehouses on the coast, that a railway line be extended to Kilkee and Kilrush, and that a very extensive programme of specified relief works be undertaken without delay.

In the afternoon, a rival meeting was held at the West End Hotel, attended by several of the prominent local personages present at the morning meeting, as well as some of those who had been absent. The parish priest did not attend. The resolutions adopted by this meeting were much more moderate and realistic, perhaps because unlike the earlier meeting, where the question had been avoided, it was proposed that part of the cost might be paid by instalment of public works loans.<sup>(22)</sup>

The chairman of the government commission set up to co-ordinate relief, Sir Randolph Routh, drew two lessons from the proceedings at Kilkee. One was that it was going to be difficult to get local landlords to contribute to relief committees, and second was that the functions of local committees would have to be more clearly delimited. This was done when after a lapse of six weeks, rules for the guidance of committees were issued at the end of February. From this time local relief committees began to operate all over the country.<sup>(23)</sup>

### County Meeting at Ennis

On the same day as the relief committee meeting at Kilkee, yet another county meeting was held, at the courthouse in Ennis. Again, broadly worded resolutions adopted by the meeting placed on government the onus for relief measures; amendment of the Drainage Act, the provision of necessary public works employment for the poor, and the facilitation of the railway network in the country. No concrete suggestions of any kind were made as to how authority within the county could tackle local distress, nor was any mention made of local funding for a relief effort. Speakers on each resolution were complacent as regards the nature of the impending crisis, clearly regarding it as a transient phenomenon, which government intervention and time would solve. There was much platitudinising: 'Let all be earnestness and unanimity and success must be inevitable'; 'the protection of life [is] paramount to the rights of property', and 'The aged, the infirm and the destitute [are] entitled to gratuitous



The bay at Kilkee.

aid and the able-bodied [are] entitled to a fair remuneration for that labour'. The rhetoric displayed during the meeting was self-congratulatory in tone as speakers of opposing political sympathies applauded themselves for having found 'the one green spot, or an oasis in the desert where Irishmen could meet on common ground for the amelioration of their country'.<sup>(24)</sup>

A short official reply to the memorial was received within days, the standard official response to such addresses, intimating only that amendment of the Drainage Act was already under consideration. Of more significance, perhaps, was the fact that the county meeting found itself constituted the 'County of Clare Central Committee', which was perhaps an unobvious ploy to elicit independent action from county property owners and magistrates on the part of a government which was itself slow to take decisive measures.<sup>(25)</sup>

### Local Self-Help:

#### Presentment Sessions

Despite the disorder of the Kilkee meeting, the self-serving cant of the county meetings and the delaying tactics of government, local initiative did gradually emerge. From the end of January, 1846, meetings in various places in Clare began to take advantage of the existing public works legislation to provide employment for the people. The law in question dated from 1837 and empowered any three county magistrates to sign requisitions convening barony or half-barony special sessions of cesspayers and justices to approve the execution of

public works within a given area. Half the cost of these works would be borne by government grant, and the other half by a loan, repayable as county cess over a number of years.<sup>(26)</sup> Virtually all of the public works provided in Clare over the ensuing months derived from this measure rather than from the government programme specifically introduced to alleviate famine distress.

It was in Kilrush that the process began, when three local magistrates were reported to be availing of the Act for the barony of Moyarta, at the end of January.<sup>(27)</sup> The presentment sessions subsequently held on the magistrates' requisition approved expenditure of £10,000.<sup>(28)</sup> Urged on by the *Clare Journal*, the magistrates in Ennis followed suit, two days after the Kilrush requisition, in order to provide funding for the completion of a new road leading to Quin.<sup>(29)</sup>

There followed a flurry of similar announcements and in a short time special presentment sessions were being held in all baronies of the county, especially during the month of March and after, presenting for large sums, usually in the region of £10,000, and almost invariably concerned with road making, cutting hills and widening turns etc. Very often special presentment sessions for the same barony were held repeatedly within the space of a few weeks and in some areas, such as at Ballyvaughan, initial presentments were only being made in mid-April.<sup>(30)</sup>

The proceedings at one of these special road sessions, that held for the upper half barony of Bunratty at the sessions house at Spencilhill on 17 March, are of interest for many reasons and worth looking at a

little more closely. Despite the bitterly cold weather, the sessions-house was packed by magistrates, cesspayers, clergy, and local people. The fullest account is from the *Limerick Chronicle*:

*Mr. J.B. Butler said he had a return of the several parishes, their population &c and calculating that £40,000 should be appropriated to the county, he found that £2,000 would be appropriated for the district. He proposed that £525 be appropriated for the parish of Clooney.*

*The Rev. Mr. Corbett, P.P. proposed that the sum should be £1,000, as the landholders would only have to pay half the tax, which would be levied and repayable by instalments.*

*Mr. Butler proposed a sum of £2,000 for the upper half-barony.*

*The Rev. Mr. Corbett thought the lowest for the upper half barony of Bunratty should be £6,000.*

*Mr. J. Singleton - As a medium between the two propositions I would move the sum of £4,000.*

*The proposition was well-received.*

*In the parish of Clooney, the sum of £1,000 was allocated for roads &c.*

*The Chairman - I object to the making of a new line of road from the lake at O'Brien's Castle to Spencilhill.*

*A plan was handed in containing two sites of this road, one leading to Colonel Wyndham's gate and the other to the fair green of Spencilhill.*

*Mr. J.B. Butler proposed a medium line, and that the matter be left to the government engineer.*

*Some discussion ensued, after which a poll took place when the line was*

lost by the chairman's casting voice. Mr. Carrick, as agent of Mr. O'Callaghan having given his assent, the other magistrates agreed to it subsequently and the road was carried, according to one of the plans submitted. Presentments of £400 were then carried for the parish of Doora.

Mr. Burton Bindon put in a tender for a new road from the Spring Well of Crusheen to O'Brien's Castle.

Mr. W. Butler opposed Mr. Bindon's proposition.

On a division the line was rejected.

For the parish of Inchicronan presentments to the amount of £1,000 were passed and approved of. For Kilraghtis parish, £500 was voted for repairs of roads, cutting down hills &c.

A sum of £1,240 was allocated to the parish of Quin, of this £800 was granted for a new line of road from Quin to Kilkishen. It was applied for by Mr. Robert A. Studdert, for whom the poor people loudly cheered.<sup>(31)</sup>

A number of things are of note: the amounts of money presented and the manner in which they were agreed, the spread of territory included, and the reluctance of cesspayers to tax themselves unduly. The vocal reaction to the presentments for Kilkishen would indicate that Robert Studdert, however precariously, still held onto his people's affections. Finally, the land agent present at the sessions, Pierce Carrick, was shot at on his way home after the sessions, dying of his wounds several days later. Apart from the sensational interest created by this murder in the country, it is also instructive as to the climate in which some of these special sessions were held.<sup>(32)</sup>

By this time, living conditions for the labouring poor had become extremely difficult over much of the county. The contemporary euphemistic phrases 'distress', and 'destitution', which are equally difficult for a modern observer to avoid, were even now becoming devalued in almost every newspaper issue. The earliest accounts of 'distress' had come from West Clare in January, especially the extremely congested districts surrounding Kilrush and Kilkee. The memorial from the first Kilkee relief committee meeting spoke of 'the suffering poor', 'unparalleled distress' and 'threatened starvation', terms which the horrors of the coming years would render meaningless.<sup>(33)</sup> Government grudgingly admitted nothing more than that 'distress in this village is undeniable'.<sup>(34)</sup> From all parts of the county, as the weeks went by, came evidence of similar hardship: southeast Clare, particularly Clonlara, Doonass, Broadford, Tulla, Clarecastle, Ennis, Kilmurry-Ibrickan, Kilrush, Kilkee, Corofin, Kilfenora. The only places which seem to have escaped more lightly at this point in the famine were the very northern parts in the baronies of Corcomroe and Burren. However, this impression may merely be a reflection of poorer newspaper coverage in these areas.

In Kilrush, a depot had been opened in January to supply Indian meal to relief committees. As soon as the government measures took effect in March, this meal was distributed through a number of sub-depots. A contributing factor to the hardship experienced in the Kilrush area was that Colonel Vandeleur, the largest local landlord, had already begun the evictions which would make him notorious two years later.<sup>(35)</sup>

In Kilkee, in late February, conditions were perhaps typical of the worst of the distress so far experienced: 160 householders and their families were in a state of abject poverty. Pigs and fowl, which had consumed the few potatoes that were left, were found when killed to have diseased livers: the stench of boiled unsound potatoes was such that even the starving could not abide to eat them. Hundreds of people in the area were 'half-starved', the characteristic signs of which were hollow and transparent cheeks, enlarged mouth, pinched-in nose, eyes that were glassy 'or else of a watery clearness'. Individuals in such a state were not known to utter any complaint or beg of anyone, but to 'follow him silently in a crowd'.<sup>(36)</sup>

### Establishment of Relief Committees

It is probably true to say that the level of distress reached in the Kilkee and Kilrush districts was not experienced by other areas of the county until considerably later, in some areas not until May or June. Certainly Kilkee and Kilrush were the first areas to apply for relief works and set up relief committees. For much of Clare, indeed, it is almost possible to correlate the onset of very severe conditions in a given area with the magistrates' requisitions for public works and the setting up of relief committees. Thus we first hear of relief committees established at Kilkee on 8 March, at Doonass, Clareabbey and Killone, and Ennis at the end of March, and Feakle in early April.<sup>(37)</sup> Committees for the half barony of Bunratty Lower were formed at a meeting held at Newmarket under the supervision of the Lord Lieutenant of the county, Sir Lucius O'Brien on 21 March,<sup>(38)</sup> and it would appear that baronial relief committees co-ordinated relief measures in some baronies at least for a short time.<sup>(39)</sup>

The territory covered by relief committees was for the most part based on combinations of civil parishes or on individual towns and villages. Their immediate role was to open subscription funds, to which the government would add a further grant, and which would be used to buy Indian meal for sale to the destitute and for the provision of short-term employment. Given the fact that destitution in many areas was by this time total, from the beginning many relief committees ignored the instruction from government that the Indian meal was to be sold, giving it gratis instead.

Initially relief committees encountered great difficulty in eliciting contributions from landowners. On 17 March, only one subscription had been received for the whole of Clare.<sup>(40)</sup> The Kilkee relief committee, influenced by a strong landlord element, itself declined to solicit contributions.<sup>(41)</sup> As late as May in Cratloe<sup>(42)</sup> and in Inch and Kilmaley in June, certain landowners were still refusing to contribute.<sup>(43)</sup> In Feakle, the relief committee, having failed to extract any contribution from the parish's absentee landlords, who between them were drawing £15,000 from it in rents, gave notice of its intention to publish in the newspapers the names of those who had refused to pay.<sup>(44)</sup> In most areas though, the situation had much improved by mid-April, and subscriptions of £200 had been raised in Newmarket, £100 in each of the districts of Quin, Sixmile-bridge and Clarecastle, and £500 in the Ennis area.

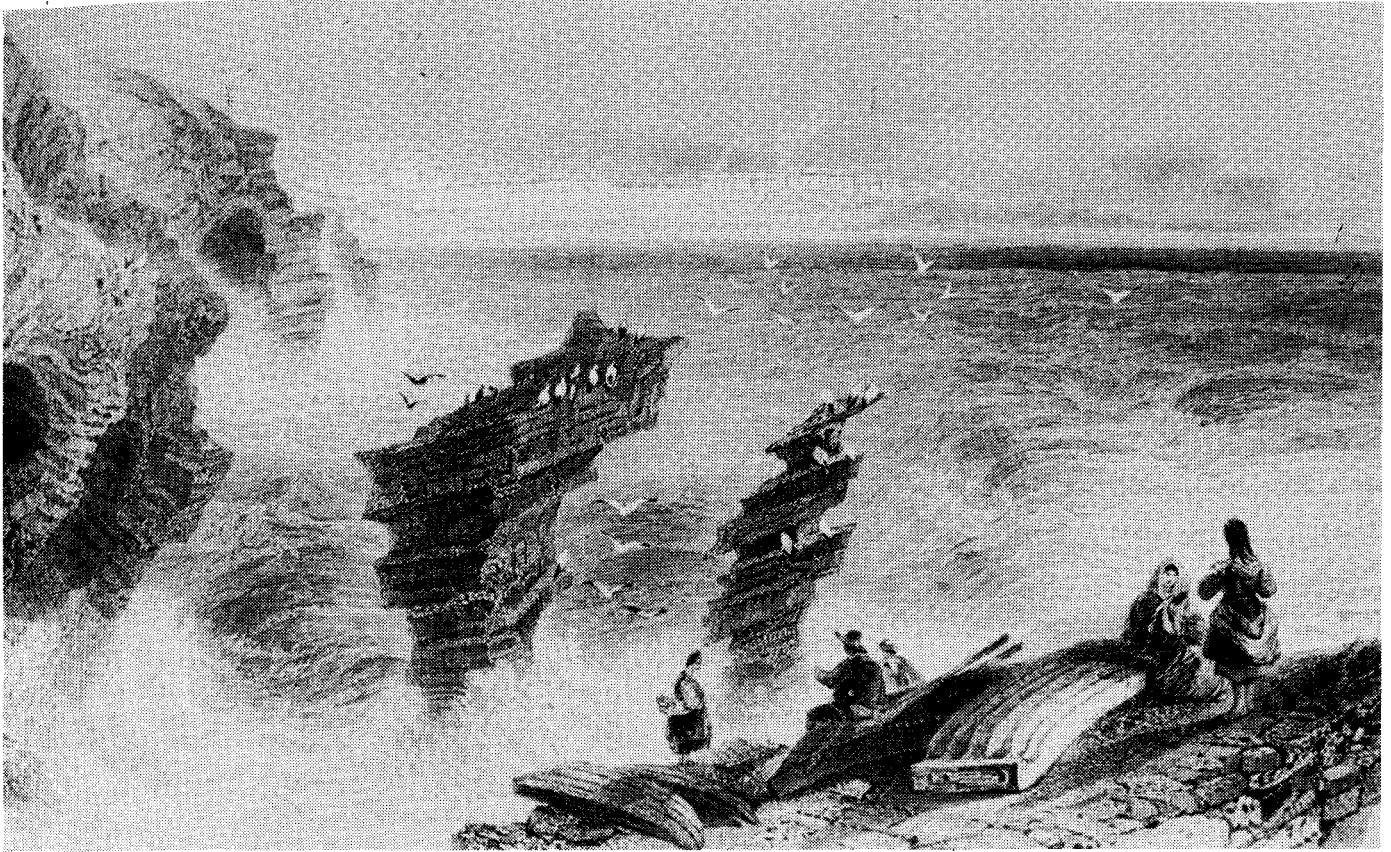
### Public Works

By now public works employment schemes were in operation in the county, beginning firstly in the western barony of Moyarta where presentment sessions had first approved expenditure on them.<sup>(45)</sup> All of these works were begun under the earlier public works act of 1837. Indeed when the new public works legislation became available in March, it was largely ignored as being unnecessary, cumbersome and expensive to implement.<sup>(46)</sup>

On 18 March, there were already 1,600 men working on Board of Works schemes in the county, nearly all in the west.<sup>(47)</sup> In Kilkee 250 labourers were working in early April at the west-end side of the town, building a road by the cliffs, and thus 'developing the sublime scenery of the coast, and a picturesque rural view of the interior'. On the road from Kilrush to Kilkee, it was reported that every hill was being cut and levelled, so that any passenger car could travel the eight miles distance with perfect ease in one hour, which used to take an hour and a half.<sup>(48)</sup> No commentator found it incongruous that gangs of half-starved men, heads of totally destitute families, should be employed making cosmetic improvements to the landscape, of benefit only to the well-off and well-fed tourist.

Works schemes rapidly multiplied as applications from presentment sessions were processed by the various agencies, until by 7 April, there were 10,870 employed by the Board of Works in Clare.<sup>(49)</sup> Up to that date, however, works were confined to West Clare, as is evident from complaints from other areas in the county that they were still bereft of any employment for the starving poor.<sup>(50)</sup> This situation changed rapidly with the laying out of fresh schemes almost every week, so that, in early May, only Islands barony, which included the county capital, Ennis, and the adjoining poverty-stricken village of Clarecastle, was still without public works employment.

In the spring of 1846, in addition to the



The rocks at Kilkee.

official public works schemes, several of the larger landowners were providing employment on their estates. At the end of March, Colonel Wyndham, absentee owner of 37,000 acres of Clare land, had his Irish agent lay out sufficient work for his tenants, so that 'not one of them should require to apply for relief to public funds and private subscription'. At the same time, James Molony of Kiltannon, Tulla, a resident landlord, as benevolent in his outlook as Colonel Wyndham, but without the rigid paternalism of that proprietor, employed every one of his tenants, and also sold to them Indian meal at cost price from a consignment which he had specially imported for the purpose. At his own expense he was thus supporting the families of 150 tradesmen and labourers.<sup>(51)</sup> Private employment schemes such as these seem to have been the prerogative of the wealthier landowners, and there are no reports of any of the lesser proprietors being so engaged.

### Unrest and Outrage

By April, delays in the establishment of works schemes and the spread of hardship, as the last of the food ran out for many people, led to a noticeable increase in public unrest. Analysis of crime figures during this period shows that purely agrarian crime, that is crime relating to landlord tenant conflict, and the Whiteboy activity which had been endemic in pre-famine Clare, actually decreased, whereas crime relating to the shortage of food was on the increase.<sup>(52)</sup> On 8 April, for example, a grainship, the *Maria*, owned by John Norris Russell, the Limerick corn merchant, bound for Clarecastle, was

plundered by a group of hungry people at Smith's Island and meal to the value of £250 was stolen. This was the first of many attacks on grain-carrying vessels in the Shannon and Fergus estuaries during the Famine and caused the government to send a naval steamer, the *Myrmidon*, to patrol the river and prevent further incidents. Guards were placed on vessels leaving Clarecastle, an area which was particularly affected by destitution.<sup>(53)</sup> In the search for the perpetrators, the commander of the *Myrmidon* entered the dwellings of some local smallholders, whom he found to be living on nothing but black and rotten potatoes. There was as yet no sign of public works beginning in the area, and the local committee was spending its funds according as subscriptions were received, largely on short term employment and the purchase of meal.

Relief committees in other areas where the public works had not yet begun were doing likewise, giving employment on successive weeks to different gangs of men, in an attempt to spread their meagre resources over a large destitute population. In Clarecastle village, for example, where squatting on the commons by incomers had much exacerbated hardship in the area, the relief committee was employing 80 destitute labourers in early April, in levelling the fair green.<sup>(54)</sup> These 80 represented only a fraction of the estimated 800 who were in a state of absolute want in the parish. This situation had not changed materially by the early part of June, when public works still had not begun.<sup>(55)</sup> At that time, according to a

local priest, Fr. O'Gorman, the labourers of Killone and Clareabbey parishes were in a 'truly awful state', and the ravages made by hunger 'so visible in their countenances, distracted manner and wild expression' was such as to lend them a 'furious' appearance.<sup>(56)</sup>

In April and May, the Cratloe committee had different gangs of men working in Cratloe Woods on alternate weeks at wages of 10d per day, the same rate as obtained in Clarecastle. At that point public works were about to begin in the district, and the committee which had hitherto not had enough funds to afford relief was now able to sell Indian meal at below cost price to the indigent.<sup>(57)</sup>

In Ennis, the relief committee, which had already spent the entire subscription they had raised locally, as well as a grant of £200 from the Lord Lieutenant, reported on April 12 that they were completely overwhelmed by applications for relief.<sup>(58)</sup> They had been employing some 300 individuals per day, which represented not even a quarter of those in real need. As well as the labourers of the town, tradesmen such as painters and slaters were in particularly bad straits, having pawned their Sunday and night clothes as well as all household articles for which they could obtain money in order to obtain food. In comparison with the poor of some rural areas, however, the slaters and painters of Ennis may in fact have been better off. In the parish of Killard in Ibrickan, at the end of the month certain cottier families had pawned their clothes and bed covering, and in addition to hunger were suffering from exposure to cold as well.<sup>(59)</sup>

## Workhouses

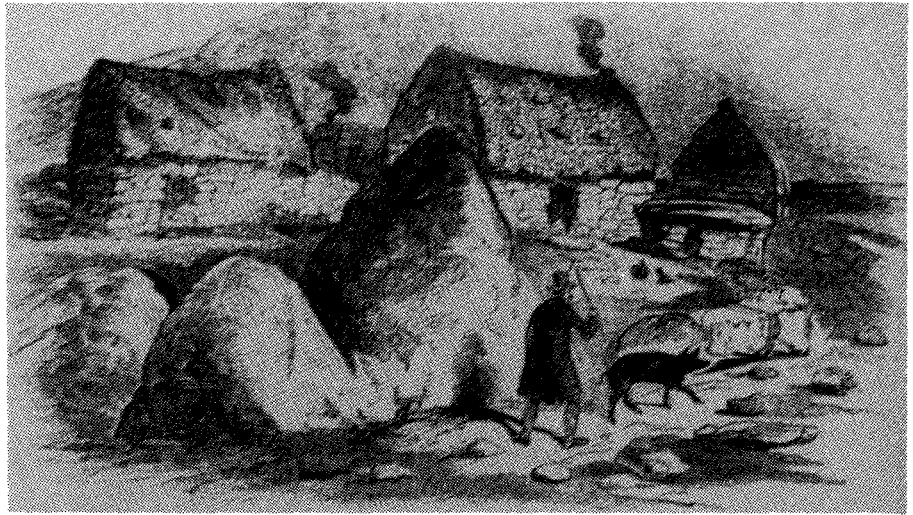
Despite the increasing hardship of these months, it is noteworthy that the Poor Law system in the county had not as yet come under any pressure. None of the four workhouses in the county at this time was more than half full, and the slow rise in admissions experienced as the summer approached was no more than the usual seasonal increase.<sup>(60)</sup> Such was the fear and loathing which the harsh and degrading Poor Law regime inspired in the great majority of the people, that no circumstances short of actual starvation of their families would persuade them to look to the workhouse for relief. And even then as subsequent events were to show, many refrained from applying for entry to the workhouse. For most of 1846, the great majority of inmates in Clare workhouses were drawn from the old, the infirm and the mentally retarded.

## The Closing of the Public Works

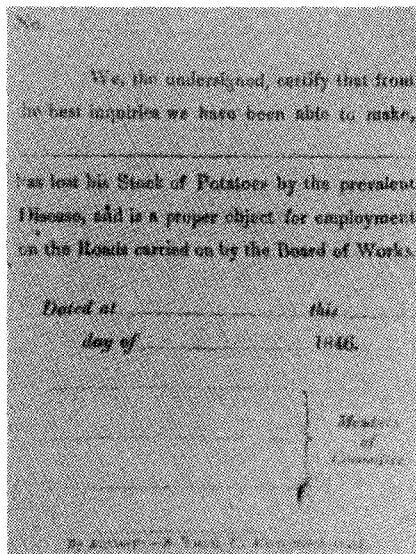
At the beginning of August, public works were in operation all over the county, and the numbers labouring on them had jumped dramatically, virtually all of them engaged in roads development under the Board of Works. By the 18th of the month, no less than 18,175 individuals were employed on a daily basis on the public works in County Clare, almost one third of all those working on Board of Works schemes in the entire country.<sup>(61)</sup> This number represents nearly a quarter of that proportion of County Clare's population who were engaged in agriculture, a figure which broadly tallies with the number of small farmers, cottiers and labourers then present in the county.<sup>(62)</sup>

Clare's extraordinary level of participation in the public works programme can be accounted for in terms of the more impoverished state of large sections of the county's population relative to other counties, and the early exploitation of the public works legislation by local communities. The scope of the public works in Clare was huge, and the mobilisation of labour it represented was by far the greatest in the county's history. Throughout the summer, new lines of road were being laid out and excavated everywhere, and new applications processed. However, it seemed that no sooner had the works been inaugurated than they were to be brought to an end. In June, Peel's Conservative government had fallen, and the new Whig administration of Lord John Russell decided after a few weeks to gradually close down the public works, before embarking on a new relief policy.<sup>(63)</sup> Regardless of the state of completion, all were to be closed.

There is no doubt that the arrival of public works in the late spring and summer of 1846 did much to alleviate the worst effects of the potato failure. However, despite the huge numbers so employed in Clare, not all areas had public works, and not all individuals had been able to obtain tickets for the works.



Scene at Derrynane Beg. Engraving, *Pictorial Times*, 7 February, 1846.



Relief works certificate, 1846. National Archives.

Throughout the summer the relief commissioners received petitions from many individuals, complaining that they had failed to gain employment.<sup>(64)</sup>

## The First Deaths by Starvation

In areas where no public works had been undertaken, the first famine deaths were already taking place in the late summer of 1846. Perhaps the earliest recorded case of death by starvation in Co. Clare during the Great Famine is that mentioned in a newspaper report of the inquest into the death of a young man in a remote area of Inagh parish at the end of July, 1846. The entire family of the victim, who was described as being imbecile in mind, had been subsisting on nothing but cabbage plants for many weeks. Unable to take any more of this awful diet, the young man refused to eat until 'hunger forced him to eat a large amount', after which he shortly died. The verdict of the jury was 'death by starvation'.<sup>(65)</sup> Further reports of deaths scattered throughout the county were to follow.

In the late summer of 1846, relief measures were in a state of suspended animation, as the new British adminis-

tration contemplated the closure of the public works. The relief commission itself was dissolved on August 15,<sup>(66)</sup> leaving local committees almost without resources. Typical of the desperate state of many committees at this time was that of Corofin, which in mid-July had applied for extra relief, stating in its application that in a few days funds would be completely exhausted.<sup>(67)</sup> The seven parishes of the district, containing over 40,000 souls, were now dependent entirely on Indian meal. As to the people in general, they were completely bereft of any resources of their own, and were now

*driven to seek relief from the committee whose means of granting such ... will cease altogether in a few days - under these circumstances the committee trust the government will place the means at their disposal to enable them to grant assistance to their numerous poor until the new crop comes in which may be expected in about five weeks.*

Committees like that of Corofin, burdened with an impossible responsibility, and now left to their own devices, over the next weeks awaited the arrival of the new potato crop with an urgency born of desperation. Early indications in July did not bode well. On 16 July, all potato gardens within the vicinity of Ennis were reported to be affected to some degree by blight,<sup>(68)</sup> and by August it was clear that the entire early crop in the county was lost.<sup>(69)</sup> A few weeks more brought the dawning realization that blight had affected the main crop also, and that this time the failure was country-wide and total. The Whig government whose responsibility it was to deal with this grave crisis was unfitted in any way to the task, and the inadequacy of its relief policies ensured that many would die in Clare in the coming season and tens of thousands in the five years of unspeakable suffering which followed.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Clare Journal*, 18 September, 1845.
2. *Clare Journal*, 16 October, p. 22, 27.
3. See the *Report of the City of London*

- Tavern Committee* (London, 1823).
4. *Clare Journal*, 4 January, 1844; *Limerick Chronicle*, 7 March, 1844.
  5. See Ciarán Ó Murchadha, 'The Diary of a Country Curate - Rev. Henry Murphy in Ennis, 1844-1846, in *The Other Clare*, Vol. 14 (1992), pp. 37-44. Rev. Murphy's diary (Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, ref. no. D.1337) contains many references to his potatoes over the months of the harvest. Failure of the potato crop is not mentioned until October 20. The diary of John Singleton (National Library of Ireland Ms. 16885) makes no mention of potato failure in his locality until 29 October.
  6. *Clare Journal*, 30 October, 1845. Randolph Routh to G.E. Trevelyan, 14 February, 1846, Correspondence explanatory of the Measures adopted by Her Majesty's Government for the Relief of Distress arising out of the failure of the Potato in Ireland 1846, H.C. (736), Vol. XXXVII, p. 86.
  7. S. Ball to the Relief Commissioners, 10 June, 1846, National Archives, Relief Commissioners' Papers, 3176. According to Ball, the area around Ennis was almost completely devastated in the first failure, which if one takes into consideration Rev. Murphy's bumper harvest, evidences localised extremes of infection.
  8. *Limerick Chronicle*, 22 October, 1846.
  9. *Limerick Chronicle*, 22 October, 1845.
  10. *Limerick Chronicle*, 14 March, 1846.
  11. For an assessment of Fitzgerald's contribution, see Austin Bourke, 'The Visitation of God?', *The Potato and the Great Irish Famine*, (Dublin, 1993), Chapter 8.
  12. *Limerick Chronicle*, 25 October, 1845.
  13. *Clare Journal*, 30 October, 1845.
  14. Letter of Robert A. Studdert, Kilkishen House, Sixmilebridge, 16 November, 1845, in National Archives, State Paper Office, Outrage Reports, 1845, Clare, 5/22863. Studdert is to be distinguished from his cousin, Robert Wogan Studdert of Newmarket House.
  15. David Wilson was extremely unpopular with his tenantry for a number of reasons, but mainly due to his manic interest in land-improvement, forcing them to adopt whatever scheme he favoured at a given time. One which must have severely tried their patience was his insistence that they carry out subsoiling which was then in vogue. When a farm had been improved by such means, Wilson then raised the rent by one half, and this accounts for the several threatening notices received by him.
  16. Plundering was already taking place. On Saturday, 15 November, one hundred men and women were reported to have gathered to dig out the crop of potatoes belonging to the lately deceased Rev. William Davoren of Kiltoraght. *Limerick Chronicle*, 19 November, 1845.
  17. *Limerick Chronicle*, 20 December, 1845.
  18. Diary of John Singleton, 29 October, 1845, *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, Vol. xxix (1975), p. 105. National Library of Ireland Ms. 16885, Oct. 29, 1845.
  19. *Limerick Chronicle*, 10 November, 1845; *Clare Journal*, 10 November, 1845.
  20. Thomas O'Neill, 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief, 1845-1852' in R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams, *The Great Famine, Studies in Irish History* (Dublin, 1956), p. 216.
  21. Randolph Routh to G.E. Trevelyan, *Correspondence Explanatory*, pp. 9-11. Woodham-Smith, op. cit., p. 64. See *Clare Journal*, January 5, 1845, for distress at Kilkee. See also Ignatius Murphy, 'Kilkee and its neighbourhood during the First Year of the Great Famine, 1845-1846' in the *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, Vol. xxi (1979), pp. 15-16.
  22. The background to the Kilkee meeting is sketched out in Ignatius Murphy, loc. cit. pp. 17-18.
  23. Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity, The Irish Famine, 1845-1852* (Dublin, 1994), p. 41. The delay was deliberate, 'so as to postpone the assistance of government to the latest date possible', Kinealy, op. cit., p. 43.
  24. Ibid.
  25. *Limerick Chronicle*, 17 January, 1846.
  26. Act I Victoria, cap. 21.
  27. *Clare Journal*, 22 January, 22, 1846, *Limerick Chronicle*, 24 January, 1846.
  28. *Limerick Chronicle*, 31 January, 1846.
  29. *Clare Journal*, 22 January; *Limerick Chronicle*, 26 January, 1846. Special baronial sessions were arranged for Spancillhill on 9 February.
  30. *Limerick Chronicle*, 11 April, 1846.
  31. *Limerick Chronicle*, 21 March, 1845.
  32. For the murder of Pierce Carrick, see Ciarán Ó Murchadha, 'The Diary of a Country Curate' in *The Other Clare*, Vol. 14 (1990), p. 43. See also *Limerick Chronicle*, 18, 21, 25 March; *Clare Journal*, 19 March, 1845; *The Times*, 2 April, 1845; *Dublin Evening Mail*, 10 April, 1845.
  33. *Correspondence Explanatory*, p. 11.
  34. Ibid., p. 10.
  35. *Clare Journal*, 16 February, 1845.
  36. Ignatius Murphy, op. cit., p. 19.
  37. John Cullinan to Routh, 6 April, 1846. N.A. Relief Commission Papers, 1846, 1284. Cornelius Hickey to Relief Commissioners, 28 March, 1846, N.A. Relief Commission Papers, 1050.
  38. *Limerick Chronicle*, 18 March, 1846.
  39. Lucius O'Brien to R. Routh, 5 April, 1846, Relief Comm. papers, no. 1280; *Limerick Chronicle*, 8 April, 1846.
  40. Woodham-Smith, op. cit., p. 68.
  41. Ignatius Murphy, 'Kilkee during the First Year of the Great Famine', p. 19.
  42. Michael McNamara to relief commissioners, 16 May, 16, 1846, Rel. Comm. papers, no. 2774.
  43. John Cullinan to Rel. Comm., June 4, Rel. Comm. papers, no. 2851.
  44. *Limerick Chronicle*, 11 April, 1846.
  45. Lucius O'Brien to Relief Commissioners, 6 April, 1846, Rel. Comm. papers, 1281.
  46. Woodham Smith, op. cit., p. 78; *Limerick Chronicle*, 4 April, 1846. 9 Vic. 1, was an amending Act to the 1 Vic. 21. The reassembled Grand Jury declined on April 3 to proceed with baronial presentment sessions on the 9 Vic. 2, under which works were to be carried out by contractors and of which all the cost would be ultimately borne by the cesspayer, on the grounds that it was unnecessary, cumbersome and expensive. The fourth Act, 9 Vic. 4, was used to revive the drainage of the Fergus, the only major project undertaken under the Act in Ireland. Delays in obtaining the necessary assent of a majority of affected landowners saw the postponement of this latter scheme until the end of September.
  47. Routh to Trevelyan, 28 March, 1846, *Correspondence Explanatory*, p. 82.
  48. *Limerick Chronicle*, April 11, 1846.
  49. Ignatius Murphy, 'Kilkee .... during the First Year of the Great Famine', p. 21.
  50. Lucius O'Brien to Randolph Routh, April 5, 1846. Relief Commission Papers, no. 1281.
  51. *Clare Journal*, 28 March, 1846; *Limerick Chronicle*, 25 March, 1846. Molony actually increased the wages of the tradesmen to 3s. per week, and the labourers to 2s. to which was added a weekly ration of Indian meal.
  52. See Andries Eiriksson, 'Crime and Popular Protest in County Clare 1815-1852' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, T.C.D., 1992) chapters 5 and 6. I am grateful to Dr. Eiriksson for permission to consult his dissertation.
  53. Lieutenant Jenkins to Admiralty, 22 April, 1846; Relief Commission Papers, no. 1861.
  54. Report of Clareabbey Relief Committee to Randolph Routh, 6 April, 1846, Relief Comm. Papers, 1284.
  55. Report of Clareabbey and Killone relief committee to Relief Commissioners, 6 June, 1846. Relief Commissioner Papers, no. 2945. Islands barony was the last barony where public works begun.
  56. *Clare Journal*, 2 July, 1846.
  57. John Cullinan to Relief Commissioners, 4 June, 1846; Relief Commission Papers, 1846-1847, 2851.
  58. John Cullinan to Relief Commissioners, 12 April, 1846, Relief Commission Papers, 1846-47, 1409.
  59. *The Times*, 30 April, 1846, citing report in a local newspaper.
  60. There were four Union workhouses in Clare: Ennis and Kilrush, each with a capacity to accommodate 800 paupers, and Scariff and Ennistymon which held a maximum of 600 each. Gort and Limerick Unions also provided accommodation for other parts of Clare.
  61. Abstract of Returns of Men Employed on Public Works, for one week ended 18 July, 1846, *Correspondence Explanatory*, Board of Works Series, 1846, p. 347.
  62. See Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, p. 59.
  63. O'Neill, 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief', p. 221.
  64. For three examples, see Relief Commission Papers, 1845-47, 3180 (Sixmilebridge, 10 June) 4964 (Ennis, 1 August) and 5449 (Clareabbey and Killone, 17 August).
  65. *Clare Journal*, 30 July, 1846.
  66. O'Neill, 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief', p. 221.
  67. John Cullinan to Relief Commissioners, 12 July, 1846, Relief Commission Papers, 1845-1847, 4211.
  68. *Clare Journal*, 16 July, 1845.
  69. *Clare Journal*, 10 August, 1846. Diary of Henry Murphy, entry for 20 August.

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