

The Great Famine in Fethard, 1845-1850

By Michael O'Donnell

Introduction

Time is subtle; its rhythm is hidden. It can allow a form of culture or experience to dominate for a period. Then quite abruptly it grinds to a halt and that experience or culture is suddenly thrown out into the bleak light of change. Such is what happened when the blight ruined the potato crops in the latter half of the 1840s.

In the 1840s Fethard was one of the small towns of south Tipperary — a market centre for its rural hinterland and a place where seeds and groceries were purchased, where a supply of post-horses were available, and where the country postman began his walking route. But such towns added nothing to the importance of the county; they consisted, in the main, of a dull, all but death-like, single street. Each comprised one or two water-pumps, one or two hotels, ten or twelve shopkeepers, about fifteen public-houses, a dozen huckster's shops, a police barracks, and some blacksmiths, bakers, shoemakers and dressmakers.

On the eve of the Great Famine Fethard had a population of close on 4,000 people, of whom half were wholly reliant on agricultural labouring for their maintenance. An 1846 directory states that the corn trade was the principal means of livelihood for the townspeople, with two flour mills giving employment, as did four corn merchants.¹ Since the ending of the Napoleonic Wars there had been a notable growth in the export of grain to England, then being heavily industrialised; so the cultivation of grain and its export must have been an important element in the local economy. This, however, would have placed a high dependence on the growing and consumption of potatoes.

A contemporary report noted "that the agricultural labourer of Ireland continues to suffer the greatest privations and hardships; that he continues to depend upon casual and precarious employment for subsistence; that he is badly housed, badly fed, badly clothed, and badly paid for his labour".² For these people the potato was almost their only food, and it formed their chief means of obtaining the other necessities of life. Labourers lived on potatoes because they were poor; they were poor because they could not obtain regular employment.

A report on those most materially affected by the Famine in Fethard was compiled in 1835 by the local Presbyterian minister, Rev. Robert Ferris, who lived on the margins of the town and would, therefore, have known the place intimately.³ The number of illegitimate children was on the increase, he reported; there were about twenty in the town, but very few deserted children. Of the latter he estimated no more than six.

In the town there were about fifty widows, who were supported by begging and about eighty men who were incapable of labour. In the main these were supported by their friends. About fifty householders supported themselves by offering lodgings to wandering beggars at a charge of 2d. a night.⁴ It can be assumed that conditions had changed but little when ten years later the blight attacked the potato crop.

1845

The strange new calamity which damaged the potato crop in 1845 had been gathering momentum around the world in the 1840s. It had originated in the potato crops of South

America. The disease attacked the potato leaves, quickly spread down to the roots, and soon after the potatoes turned black and rotted. In September 1845, borne on the wind and rain of that summer and carried also by an improved sea transport, this disease struck at the potato crop in Ireland.

When it struck it made but a slight impression on the Irish mentality, which saw want and famine as part of the common experience of life. At the end of September 1845 the only reported news item on Fethard was an account of a group of people from the town, led by the parish priest Fr. Michael Laffan and three other priests, who journeyed to Thurles on 25 September to attend a monster Repeal Association meeting.⁵ Even on 1 October the *Tipperary Free Press* was still upbeat in its editorial: "It is ascertained that the potato crop is much less damaged than thought and, owing to the fine weather which we had, sanguine hopes are entertained".

But the sanguine hopes began to fade as people came to realise that the country was infested by something serious. On 14 October 1845 the *Freeman's Journal* carried the following melancholy comment: "We regret to find that the accounts we receive tend to confirm the apprehension that there is a considerable failure in the potato crop, and that the disease which has caused it is not on the decrease".

Nevertheless, in its editorial of 15 October the *Tipperary Free Press*, while accepting that the general reports were far from encouraging, continued to view the local scene optimistically: "We are delighted to be able to announce that the crop in the neighbourhood of this town is fully as abundant and equally as good as remembered for some years". In October potatoes were still readily available in South Tipperary. They were being sold to Cashel Workhouses at from 3½d. to 4d. the stone, and bread was supplied at 8d. for the 4 lb. loaf. Milk was being purchased at 7¼d. the imperial gallon.⁶

But by the end of that month there were signs of public panic and a widespread feeling that the Government should intervene to meet the anticipated crisis. Meetings were held in Dublin and a Mansion House committee was formed. Meetings were also held in a number of Irish towns. The consequence was that there was a call for Government to implement measures such as employment on public works, stopping the export of corn and the closing of distilleries to ameliorate the coming crisis.

That autumn the British Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, putting into action what could be described as a normal response to famine, nominated a Relief Commission for Ireland on 18 November, showing foresight in his handling of the threatened food shortage. The Commission was given the task of advising the Government, co-ordinating the activities of local relief committees, and gathering information on the volume of provisions within the country while monitoring the spread of the blight. Its chairman was Sir Randolph Routh.

The local relief committees were voluntary organisations consisting of members of the principal families in a district, such as landlords, merchants and large farmers. Clergymen from various denominations also served on it. The prime functions of these committees were to provide work locally by means of road repairs or stone-breaking and to purchase and re-sell Indian meal which had been bought by the Government.

The committees were financed by voluntary subscriptions taken up in the local community. The amount collected could be matched by a 100% grant from the Government. To qualify for such a grant committees had to comply with instructions issued by the Government. However, these instructions were not issued until 28 February 1846, by which time there was considerable distress. Also, in order to enable the poor to buy food, relief works were organised by both the Board of Works and the Grand Juries. Despite the increasing want the Cashel Board of

Guardians petitioned on 8 November 1845 the Presentment Sessions sitting for the barony of Middlethird, that the gentlemen would not initiate too many road works so as "not to allow the people to be too heavily taxed".⁷

1846

In January 1846 the Relief Commission was issued with a new set of instructions which, among other things, directed that landlords should make greater efforts to alleviate distress. In February food depots were established from which local relief committees could purchase meal at cost price for distribution, but only when food prices were rising in their area. That at Clonmel was the nearest to Fethard.

At the same period the local committees were ordered to publish their subscription lists. The Fethard lists can be read in the *Tipperary Free Press*. They had to forward to the Relief Commission a list of landlords who failed to subscribe to the local collection. The principal tasks of the local committees remained the raising of money, providing food and the creation of employment locally.

According to the new regulations local committees were expected to obtain a list of all persons in each townland together with "minute reports of the circumstances of each family from whom application for relief may be made". A register had to be kept of all persons who received relief; these were issued with a ticket or record card. The register for Fethard appears not to have survived. Despite the increasing destitution there was, at this point, little if no co-operation between local relief committees and the local Poor Law Union.

Though the Lord Lieutenant had requested the Government in December 1845 to involve the Board of Works in the Famine relief operation, it was not until the beginning of March 1846 that legislation was introduced which confirmed them in this work. At this time four Acts were passed to promote the development of fisheries and harbours, to encourage drainage and other such improvements, and to facilitate the construction and repair of roads. It was expected that all these works would be financed by the local Grand Juries, the exception being the roads for which the Government would grant 50% of the cost. Because of this road repair was the most popular of the public employment schemes.

Figures from the Clonmel market for January 1846 illustrate the cost of basic foods at this time. Wheat sold at 1s. 1d. a stone; second flour and household flour were 36s. a bag, and oatmeal from 13s. to 16s. a stone. Beef sold at 4d. to 5d. the pound weight, and potatoes from 4d. to 4.5d. a stone, which would have been 2s. 8d. to 3s. a hundredweight (50 kilos). These represented a 50% increase when compared to the cost of quality potatoes in October 1845 when they were 2s. a hundredweight.⁸ In the Spring seed potatoes in the Cashel area were selling for 9d. per stone.⁹

These were the food costs for a man who at the time was earning no more than 8d. to 10d. a day, about 5s. a week. Out of this he paid a 1s. a week for rent and another 1s. for fuel, leaving 3s. for food and clothes. But farmers seldom provided steady work, and a good third of Fethard's population depended on agriculture for their livelihood. For them the worst periods in any year were from the beginning of December to the end of February and from mid-June to mid-August. The Board of Works at this time paid a daily rate of from 9d. to 10d. a day, which the British Treasury condemned as too high. The Board's officers were ordered in the Spring of 1846 to reduce wages to force men off public works and back to agricultural work.

At the end of February 1846 the *Tipperary Free Press*, in an editorial, was advising its readers that a food shortage was imminent. "There is not in Ireland two months' provisions, that is in

the hands of the people. At the end of two months, at furthest, there will be in Ireland four millions of human beings without food".¹⁰ The destitute reacted vigorously at first to the scarcity of provisions; food rioting was widespread before distress had weakened the will to protest. At no time was there resistance to landlord or Government policy.

In mid-April 1846 a mob attacked Mr. Harvey's store, from which three sacks of flour were taken.¹¹ The hungry rioters then turned on Mrs. Wilson's store, but were repulsed.¹² "The military had no means of acting while the work of destruction was going on. But the Archdeacon himself, at the head of his honest parishioners, and unaided by any Government force, saved the property of the inhabitants.¹³ Since then special constables have been sworn in, and the town and parish are now guarded by as faithful and brave a band as ever defended hearthstones or altar".¹⁴

To meet the dangers of fever, which usually followed any prolonged scarcity of food, a Temporary Fever Act was passed.¹⁵ According to this, medical officers should be appointed as required and Boards of Guardians could be ordered to set up temporary hospitals equipped with bedding, medicines and medical appliances. At the beginning of April 1846 a memorial was sent from the principal inhabitants and Catholic and Protestant clergymen of Fethard to the Chief Secretary in Dublin Castle. They complained that typhus fever had come to the town, owing to the poverty of the inhabitants, and requested the appointment of a medical officer to the town and district.¹⁶

By May 1846 the situation in the Fethard area was that in Kiltinan two-thirds of the potato crop were lost and half the labourers were idle. In Fethard itself half the crop was lost, and one-third of the labourers were idle.¹⁷

Encouraged by the Government, local relief committees were formed throughout most of the country. On 28 April 1846 a letter was sent to the Secretary of the Scarcity Commission, Dublin, from Fethard. In part it reads: "We are requested to inform you that a meeting was held in this town for the purpose of forming a Relief Committee on the 24th April. William Barton was in the chair. The Rev. Thomas Woodward,¹⁸ Rev. Patrick Laffan,¹⁹ and Henry Sayers, Esq.,²⁰ were deputed to act as secretaries".

A committee was selected to carry out the intention of the meeting. Subscriptions were taken up to meet the urgent distress then existing in the locality and £145 was contributed at the meeting.²¹ The committee then proceeded to open a general subscription list and expressed the hope that Government assistance, on the basis of a £1 for every £1 of subscription obtained, would be forthcoming.

Curiously, in the published Scarcity Commission reports for 4 April 1846 there is a note that a committee was organised in Fethard at that time and that £40 was placed in its hands by the local Temperance Society "to purchase food, and to sell it at a cheap rate to the poor". This committee requested £20 from the Government, so that with a total of £60 it would be enabled to give cheap food to the poor for five months.²² This may have been a spontaneous working body created by the local famine conditions that caused the food riots later in the month.

On 9 May the newly formed Relief Committee forwarded a list of subscribers to the fund to the Relief Headquarters in Dublin Castle. The total subscribed was £363. 7s. 2d. of which the leading subscribers were the Fethard Loan Fund which gave £52. 6s., Rev. Henry Woodward,²³ who gave £30, and William Barton of Grove, whose contribution was £20. In a note attached to the Fethard list the Commissariat General recommended that £250 be paid to the local committee by the Government. A covering letter notes: "We beg to remind you that the Fethard Relief Committee is acting not merely for this very poor and populous town, but also for extensive and highly pauperised district extending many miles around it . . .".²⁴

Despite the conditions of want there appears to have been speculation in the sale of Indian

meal. It was often sold at double its original purchase price on the Irish docks. The Clonmel coach owner Charles Bianconi purchased a small quantity in New York at 23s. per quarter (40 pounds the quarter). He later discovered that the same meal would have cost him 72s. on the Liverpool docks. Both ship-owners and local hucksters paid themselves well on the needs of the starving Irish.²⁵

Indian meal was not new to the Irish, nor probably to the poor of Fethard. Humphrey O'Sullivan, the diarist in nearby Callan, wrote on 12 May 1827 that "Indian meal has come in from America: many people like it well: it will keep down the cost of living for the poor". However, it was not until 1846 and the following years that Indian meal became an important part of the poor's staple diet.

But Indian meal, sometimes called yellow meal or brimstone, never became popular. Many of the poor were unacquainted with the mode of preparing it either as stirabout or as bread. Elizabeth Smith commented on the lack of culinary skills among the Irish poor. "And in the matter of food which supplies the strength on which the breadwinner works, the women are so ignorant, so indolent, that they are utterly incapable of preparing a comfortable meal. They have no fuel indeed to cook one, nor pot, nor pan, nor griddle, nor crock to prepare one in, most of them at least. — 5 Jan. 1847".²⁶

Following the repeal of the Corn Laws in July 1846 Sir Robert Peel's Government was forced out of office to be replaced by a Whig administration led by Lord John Russell. Russell allowed the relief operations already in progress to continue. The need for continuing relief is illustrated by the fact that in the four weeks up to 27 Jun 1846 there were 13,726 persons on road relief work in the barony of Middlethird.²⁷ But changes were being made by the new Government as harvest-time approached. The temporary relief measures which had been introduced by Peel in 1845/46 were to be phased out from mid-August 1846 onwards when the new crop of potatoes became available.

On 21 August 1847 Rev. Thomas Woodward and Henry Sayers, the joint secretaries to the local relief committee, forwarded a report to the Relief Commission in Dublin detailing their work to that date and giving some description of local conditions. Since their formation in April the committee had put £1,061. 11s. 8d. through their hands. Local subscriptions had raised £274. 18s. 11d. and the Government had donated £250. The Calcutta Relief Fund had forwarded £50, the Fethard Loan Funds £52. 6s. and the local Temperance Fund £10. The sale of Indian meal had taken in £417. 18s. 3d., the sale of the sacks in which it was brought to Fethard from Clonmel fetched £2, and the stones which the labourers broke were sold for £4. 8s. 6d. In this way did the committee make up the £1,061.

The money collected was spent in employing labourers, reducing the sale price of meal (which the committee purchased at the food depot in Clonmel at prices ranging from £9 to £11. 18s. a ton), and "£50 was expended in the nourishment of the sick poor". The labourers were put to sewerage work, possibly building the original sewerage system for the town – the Town Commissioners' minutes have not survived for this period – and improving and paving the suburbs of the town.

For this ordinary labourers were paid 8d. a day and quarrymen and pavers 1s. a day. The committee began employing labourers on 13 May and in the three-month period covered by the report they paid out £303. 19s. 1d. In May the committee employed 296 persons weekly, in June 760, in July 962, from 1 to 15 August 720. On the latter date the employment of labour was suspended.

On 2 May 1846 the committee began selling Indian meal in the town. The report noted that 743 individuals purchased the meal in quantities ranging from 3 lbs. to 2 stone, the selling price

being 1s., 1s. 2d., or 1s. 4d. per stone. In the three-month period the committee purchased and sold 51 tons and 5 hundredweights of meal. The cost of transporting the meal from Clonmel was eight guineas and a storehouse in Fethard was rented for £4.

Of the money acquired since April the committee had £165. 15s. 0½d. remaining; but by 31 October 1846 this was reduced to £1. 6s. 11d. With that small sum the committee had to cope with scarcity and a harsh winter.²⁸ But, as will appear, the committee again rose to new efforts and determination to keep the starving fed.

By the first week of August 1846 potato crops were again ruined everywhere. Humid conditions meant that once again the blight fungus flourished; this time over two-thirds of the total crop were lost. In mid-July the general opinion in Ireland was that the disease was gaining a foothold even in areas where it had not been noticeable in the previous year. This widespread harvest loss heralded the true beginning of the Great Famine.

The price of potatoes of all varieties rocketed. Quality potatoes that had been selling for less than two shillings the hundredweight in October 1845 were now fetching seven shillings in October 1846; even the poor quality Lumper potato jumped from sixteen pence to six shillings for the same weight. At this latter date the average agricultural wage (about five shillings) was lower than the cost of a hundredweight of potatoes. In October 1846 the Cashel Guardians were no longer buying potatoes; instead, they were purchasing Indian meal at £20 the ton. Even milk was now costing 9d. for a gallon instead of the 7¼d. paid a year previously.²⁹

In a normal pre-Famine year the Irish produced about fifteen million tons of potatoes – half for human consumption and the remainder for animal fodder. To place the terrible autumn of 1846 in context, the blight destroyed about fourteen million tons of potatoes. This was the fearful reality of famine, especially for the cottiers and agricultural labourers who relied solely upon the potato to feed themselves and their pig.

The demand for government relief manifested itself in the weeks immediately following the harvest. Nevertheless, the Government was determined not to open the food depots until absolute necessity demanded, and in the autumn of 1846 some local relief committees had to rely on private traders for their supplies. In its own way this contributed to a rise in the price of Indian meal.



Main Street, Fethard – a Lawrence photograph taken near the end of the last century (National Library of Ireland).

The new Government in October 1846 issued further instructions to local committees stipulating that the meal sold by them should be sold in small quantities only, and to people who were destitute. Those capable of work were not to be supplied with free meal. A further unpopular aspect of the new instructions was that local committees were expected to charge the market rate for whatever meal they sold.

On 24 September the secretaries of the Fethard Relief Committee wrote to Dublin: "We are directed by the Relief Committee of this town earnestly to solicit that you will without delay have the kindness to call the attention of his Excellency (the Lord Lieutenant) to the want of provisions existing in this neighbourhood. The price of Indian meal, now the staple supply of our numerous population, is now so very high, that the families of even Labourers in employment are in the utmost necessity, while those who are unemployed are actually in a starving condition. The Committee would humbly approach his Excellency with a request that steps may be taken without delay for the establishment of a Depot of Indian Meal in Fethard for the supply of this town and Neighbourhood".³⁰

The reply of the Commissariat General to this was that it was not "intended to establish a Commissariat Depot for the Sale of Food, except in remote Western Districts, where the ordinary operations of trade are not yet sufficient to provide for the wants of the population; neither is it proposed at any place to sell food under the current Market Price, as the effect of such a course would be to draw away all business from traders, on whom the population must mainly rely for subsistence".³¹

Following this second potato failure in 1846, Lord John Russell's Government used three units to combat famine. These were the local workhouse, the local relief committee and the public works. The first was seen as the permanent system of relief and the other two were used as temporary measures to supplement the first. Of the two temporary measures the public works were deemed the principal agency, showing that the Government were deeply committed to the principle of relief in return for labour.

In the Summer of 1846 the Government had passed without opposition an Act entitled An Act to Facilitate the Employment of the Labouring Poor, or more commonly, the Labour-rate Act.³² The Government now intended using payment for labour to solve the food crisis in Ireland, because the direct feeding of a starving population was anathema to Whig policy. The leading provision of this measure was that the Lord Lieutenant was empowered to assemble an extraordinary presentment sessions for any district in which distress existed, such sessions being authorised to undertake public works.

The works were paid for by the Board of Works, but repayment was expected from the land occupiers in the area concerned through a levy on the Poor Rate. Thus in law the whole expense of supplying food to the people during the remainder of the year 1846 was made a local charge. However, while the clauses of such an Act may have been well-meaning in the context of the times, at local level it seems not to have worked as the following letter from the Fethard Relief Committee attests.

The three secretaries wrote on 26 September 1846 to the Lord Lieutenant in the following terms: "We are directed humbly to approach your Excellency with this earnest Solicitation that the necessities of this locality may receive the prompt and paternal consideration of Her Majesty's Government.

"At the Extraordinary Sessions held for this Barony at Cashell on the 19th inst. [September] no Presentments were passed for the employment of the Labourers, 480 in number, seeking employment upon Public Works within the District for which your Committee is acting, and we feel it our duty to inform your Excellency that the funds at our Disposal will in a very few

days be exhausted, and that, unless some immediate steps be adopted for the Employment of these destitute Labourers, the very worst consequences must be apprehended.³³

"We are further desirous to inform your Excellency that Provisions are now selling at such exorbitant prices in this town that Labourers, receiving ten pence a day, are unable to procure a sufficiency of food for their families if those families are, as is very common, composed of five or more individuals. Should the rate of Wages upon Public Works be fixed lower than ten pence, actual starvation must ensue in many cases. We therefore would most humbly entreat your Excellency to direct that the wages in this neighbourhood should be fixed no lower than ten pence, which is the rate fixed by the Relief Committee of Fethard for their own works."

This letter was passed on, like all others (perhaps unread) by the Lord Lieutenant to the Commissariat General, who answered it on 5 October. He informed the committee that a second works presentment was being held for the barony of Middlethird. He did, however, go on to note that "with respect to wages the officers of the Board of Works are not authorised to allow such wages as will induce the labourers of the country to leave their ordinary employers, [but] that a fair remuneration will be given to the work performed".³⁴

In the midst of all this distress and hardship the local relief committee was remodelled following the receipt of a circular from the Relief Commission Office in Dublin. This change produced a long letter to the Lord Lieutenant, the Earl of Bessborough, from Fr. Patrick Laffan, one of the secretaries to the old committee, in which he gave the Earl the benefit of his thoughts on how best to combat famine in Ireland. The letter has survived in our National Archives.³⁵ On 15 October the new committee secretary wrote to Sir Randolph Routh: "I have the honour to inform you, that pursuant to the Government instructions, the Lord Lieutenant of the County has formed a Relief Committee for this Town and Neighbourhood, of which the Chairman is John Millett, Esq., Lismortagh, and the Secretary Sam. H. Barton, Esq., Grove".³⁶

Despite the official changes the local relief committee continued to collect money for the relief of Fethard's destitute. Between 31 August and 21 December a sum of £300. 11s. was subscribed in sums ranging from 2s. 6d. to £30. Among the noteworthy subscribers was Rev. Henry Woodward, who gave £20 on 9 November and who on 30 November combined with his curate, Rev. Thomas Woodward, to give £50. The Commissariat Office recommended that £300 in government money be paid, which was done on 23 December.³⁷

The money collected locally and that paid over by the Government appears to have been used to organise a soup kitchen for the town. Major Robertson, the Commissariat inspecting officer for Co. Tipperary, reported in the week ending 6 February 1847 that he had visited Fethard so as to attend a meeting of the relief committee. A soup kitchen had been established there on 12 December 1846; since that time, he noted, 4½ gallons of soup had been issued daily as well as meal. He considered the soup to be good and substantial.

At the meeting he attended it was resolved that £15 should be withdrawn weekly from the subscription fund to help reduce the wholesale price of the meal and to purchase ingredients for the soup. He wrote that "the Rev. Thomas Woodward [the curate] has a separate fund for supplying soup to the poor; and he informed me that his daily issues were extended to 120 persons. The tickets are purchased by individuals, who give them to the poor, thus enabling the kitchen to support itself nearly".³⁸ The Major estimated that about 1,000 families in the Fethard area were on relief.

While the local relief committees were expected to be subordinate to the work of the Board of Works in the autumn of 1846, they were required to undertake quite a range of duties. They still had to raise money locally to fund relief; they were also expected to provide work for the able-bodied, and to promote drainage and land reclamation locally. However, they could no

longer issue tickets of employment to those seeking Board of Works jobs. Instead, their remit was to compile lists of able-bodied workers which they forwarded to Board of Works inspectors; the latter issued the employment tickets.

The Labour-rate Act, which had been passed in the Summer of 1846, in time proved a failure, because of the numbers seeking relief. Between October 1846 and the Spring of 1847, they rose from a quarter-million to three-quarters of a million. The Board was unable to cope, so the Government had no option but to alter its policy. It was decided at the end of 1846 to wind down the relief works and to resort to an emergency scheme of direct outdoor relief. This reversal could not become effective overnight; it was only in the second quarter of 1847 that the phasing out of relief works became operational.

At the end of 1846 the local workhouse in Cashel was suffering from its own problems, because rates were not being promptly paid. For example, throughout 1846 the poor rate collector for Fethard seems to have been careless in his returns. The Board was threatening to suspend him by year's end because of the large sums still uncollected in that area (or perhaps not brought to account); it stood at £1,000. By mid-January 1847, however, Thomas Breen, the collector in question, had paid £700 of his outstanding debt.³⁹ These rates were paid by the landlords and the middling and larger farmers, with landlords being liable for the whole of the rates on farms of under £4 valuation and for half of the rates on all other farms.

To add to the woes of the starving Irish the winter of 1846/47 was one of the severest in living memory. Snow fell in early November 1846 and the roads were rendered virtually impassable by almost continuous frost. The road works were no longer possible and men were breaking at a lower wage – generally about 4s. a week. A man was permitted to break about 1½ tons of stones a day, for which he earned 10d. a ton.

On Wednesday, 2 December the Relief Commissariat inspector, Lt. Col. Douglas, attended at the post office in Fethard to inspect the workings of the local relief committee. He examined their accounts and found them in good order, but complained that the registry of relief applicants was being irregularly kept and that individual cases were not being closely scrutinised. He noted that a soup kitchen was about to be established in the town, and recommended the employment of women and that a ladies society should be organised.

Of the 9,609 persons in the Fethard Electoral Division, 1,000 were then working on the public schemes, while a further 685 were pressing their application. However, in a letter written on 29 December from Tullamaine Castle, where he was recovering from an "indisposition", there is the inference that Lt. Col. Douglas intended having the numbers employed in Fethard reduced.

In a letter of 2 December Douglas stated: "The sale of meal by retail at the wholesale cost price has been in operation for some time by a system of tickets given by members subscribing £1. The value of each ticket is 3½d. Each person holding a ticket procures a stone of whole meal for 1/7 making the whole price 1/10½ per stone. This system is not a departure from the defined principle of selling".⁴⁰

1847

That people were naturally becoming depressed by the extent of their distress is shown by a letter written by Robert Davis, a Clonmel Quaker. Following a ride from Clonmel to Burncourt and back he wrote on 26 February 1847 to the Relief Committee of the Society of Friends at Clonmel: "It was also remarkable, in passing along through these destitute districts, to observe the total absence of anything bordering on pleasantries or cheerfulness in the countenances of the people, old and young; all seemed to be down-stricken and dejected; and yet, strange to

say, I there saw the flour and meal being conveyed along the road without any escort, save that of the car-driver".⁴¹ Elsewhere in the south of the county, however, there were reported cases of the robbing of flour and Indian meal from carmen.

In the parliamentary session of 1847 a number of Acts were passed for the relief of the starving in Ireland. The first was a Poor Relief (Ireland) Act, or more commonly the Soup Kitchen Act, which became law on 16 April.⁴² According to this, which was valid until 30 September, all the destitute of whatever class were to receive rations without labour being required in return.

The decision to feed a high proportion of the Irish population without charge and without requiring them to enter the workhouse marked a definite break with previous famine relief policies. Relief committees were now re-organised in every Poor Law Union and ration cards, stating each applicant's entitlements, were issued. This scheme was funded in part by the Government treasury, by loans advanced on the security of the local rates, and by local subscriptions. The responsibility for providing relief was now placed fully on the administrative unit of the Poor Law Union; and labour, either with the Board of Works or otherwise, was no longer expected to meet the demands of relieving distress.

Tickets of parchment were issued to the hungry which entitled the holder to rations of bread and soup. Parchment was used instead of cardboard because it was more durable and had to last six months. The ticket contained the name, address, number in family and a six-month calendar covering the period January to June 1848. On the receipt of food, the date on this calendar was punctured with a large awl. Each ticket was numbered to correspond with particulars which were kept in a registry book, which could be referred to if any doubts arose as to the *bona fides* of the persons presenting the ticket.

Through the negligence of Government the new Soup Kitchen Act had not come into operation in many Poor Law Unions even by 15 May, a fortnight after the public works ceased. This hiatus in famine relief in the early months of 1847, during one of the most difficult periods of all, and one marked by extremely high death-rates, is probably one of the most serious inadequacies in the whole Government relief programme, and throughout the country was a cause of public disturbance and outrage.

South Tipperary was not free from such violence, because as want and starvation increased in the Spring of 1847 there was an upsurge in the pilfering and plundering of grain supplies. In a number of instances crowds of hungry people attempted to exert pressure on local officials or on the local workhouse. Many, too, took more direct action as the following two incidents show. Two cars taking flour from Clonmel to Cashel were stopped at Clerihan by a party of desperate men on 20 February 1847. The robbers took one bag of flour, but fled when one of the carmen produced a pistol.⁴³ In the second incident a cavalcade of cars left Clonmel with Indian meal for Cashel and other places on the night of 30 May. The last car in the convoy was attacked near Cashel and sixteen hundredweight of meal taken.⁴⁴

While the Government was dealing with famine in its own dilatory way, some local Fethard gentry were making their own efforts. On 18 January 1847 Colonel Palliser of Derryluskan handed in a paper to the Relief Commission in Dublin offering the following proposals for solving the local problem. "The Fethard Relief Committee being desirous of promoting Spade Labour in the fields, instead of on the roads, and more particularly among the female portion of the poorer classes, and with a view of discountenancing the existing degrading system of begging, make this appeal to enable them to prosecute their object".

The committee intended to appeal to all well-off people in the locality of Fethard for donations to fund this scheme, or for interest-free loans which would be repaid in full by

1 November 1847. The committee planned that the money collected be given in loans, at a rate of interest not specified, to local tenants who would then give employment to Fethard's poor in such work as "trenching, subsoiling and cropping" of land. It was proposed that the money would be made available to local tenants from James Smith's office in Fethard, the donations and loans being paid to the Tipperary Joint Stock Bank in Clonmel. It is not known if these proposals ever became reality, or if the local farmers, naturally conservative, ever took up the loans offer.⁴⁵

However, at the beginning of 1847 the local rector, Rev. Henry Woodward, did, in his own words, "establish a Committee of Ladies whose object and employment it is to employ the females of the district, in knitting, spinning, sewing, etc. – supplying them with materials for their work and paying them with food". Initially, each lady on the committee was expected to seek donations so that the project could be funded. Following the initial outlay it was expected that the sale of articles run up would fund future needs. In his letter, dated 11 February 1847, in which the rector notified the authorities of this scheme to give employment to poor women, he records that he had received £30 from the people of Bristol specifically for the relief of the hungry in Fethard.⁴⁶

By 25 February 1847 this committee had collected £82. 16s. in subscriptions. The main subscribers were Mrs. Barton of Grove (£10), Mrs. Meagher, Tullamaine (£5), the Society of Friends in Clonmel (£10), and William and Oliver Latham (£30). The secretary to this committee was Rebecca Wilson, possibly the daughter of Mrs. Wilson, a local mill-owner. The officers and supporters were all members of the local Church of Ireland community.

On 16 March 1847 the Fethard Relief Committee informed the authorities in Dublin that, between that date and 16 January past, a sum of £190. 10s. had been collected in local subscriptions. On this occasion the money was mainly collected from the wives and daughters of the local gentry. The Government honoured the Fethard effort by subscribing £190 to the fund. A note added to this collection list records that the workhouse in Cashel had at this time a surplus of 501 inmates above what it was built to hold.⁴⁷

Such were the workhouse conditions in the early months of 1847 that the relief authorities were compelled to institute a series of reforms. One was the construction of separate fever hospitals; another was the expansion of workhouse accommodation by the erection of temporary sheds or the hiring of local buildings. However, it was in the last months of 1847 before the Board of Guardians in Cashel examined the feasibility of providing extra workhouse accommodation in Fethard.

The spread of a new danger, typhus fever, forced the Guardians to convert some buildings in Fethard for use as a temporary fever hospital. This disease appeared in Clonmel in November 1846 and rose to fearful levels in 1847.⁴⁸ Typhus seems to have struck initially in Fethard in the Spring of 1847.⁴⁹

11-24/
No. 200 **Soup Ticket.**

Name,.... *Pat Rogers*
Residence,.... *Morgan's Lane*
No. in Family for Relief,.... *five*

JANUARY.							APRIL.						
Su.	3	10	17	24	31	Su.	4	11	18	25			
Mo.	4	11	18	25	Mo.	5	12	19	26				
Tu.	5	12	19	26	Tu.	6	13	20	27				
We.	6	13	20	27	We.	7	14	21	28				
Th.	7	14	21	28	Th.	8	15	22	29				
Fr.	8	15	22	29	Fr.	9	16	23	30				
Sa.	9	16	23	30	Sa.	10	17	24					

FEBRUARY.							MAY.						
Su.	7	14	21	28	Su.	3	9	16	23	30			
Mo.	1	8	15	22	Mo.	3	10	17	24	31			
Tu.	2	9	16	23	Tu.	4	11	18	25				
We.	3	10	17	24	We.	5	12	19	26				
Th.	4	11	18	25	Th.	6	13	20	27				
Fr.	5	12	19	26	Fr.	7	14	21	28				
Sa.	6	13	20	27	Sa.	8	15	22	29				

MARCH.							JUNE.						
Su.	7	14	21	28	Su.	6	13	20	27				
Mo.	1	8	15	22	Mo.	7	14	21	28				
Tu.	2	9	16	23	Tu.	1	8	15	22				
We.	3	10	17	24	We.	2	9	16	23				
Th.	4	11	18	25	Th.	3	10	17	24				
Fr.	5	12	19	26	Fr.	4	11	18	25				
Sa.	6	13	20	27	Sa.	5	12	19	26				

A Famine soup ticket for Pat Rogers of Morgan's Lane (National Archives, Dublin).

To meet this new contagion two Acts were passed.⁵⁰ A Temporary Fever Act had been passed in 1846 which made the local Boards of Guardians responsible for establishing extra fever hospitals; but most Boards did not have the money to do so. The new Acts of April 1848 created a central Board of Health, and the Government made this responsible for the establishment of temporary fever hospitals.

The new Board also had the responsibility for such things as the purchase of coffins, whitewashing of buildings and fumigation of the houses of the sick. At the parish level local relief committees were expected to implement the directives of the new Board. Any loans granted by Government for the establishment of a temporary fever hospital were expected to be repaid from the Poor Law rates.

Temporary fever hospitals were commonly established in houses rented or occasionally lent for this purpose. Such a hospital was founded in Fethard following an order dated 22 May 1847, and was intended to serve the electoral divisions of Fethard, Peppardstown, Kiltinan, Magorban, Drangan and Cloneen. The Government advanced £310 towards its establishment and expected that it would accommodate 50 patients, 2 nurses and one wards maid.⁵¹

Following letters received from Doctor Heffernan, the Cashel Guardians' medical officer, and Dr. Ryall of Fethard, the provision of a fever hospital for Fethard was discussed by the Guardians. Reference was made to the fact that fever was on the increase in the area; this had been noted by both doctors as early as January. In a letter of 11 May 1847 the Board of Health recommended that a fever hospital should be provided in Fethard and that Dr. John Flynn of Fethard should be the medical attendant. At their meeting of 8 July 1847 the Guardians resolved that, as a result of the increase in fever in the Fethard area and the large extent of country that Dr. Flynn had to cover, a second medical officer was necessary for the fever hospital. The Guardians recommended that Dr. Francis Burgess fill the position.⁵²

While little is known about the day-to-day running of the local fever hospital, it seems that by the end of 1847 it was running over budget. At a meeting of the Cashel Guardians on 18 December 1847 the Fethard committee were requested to confine their expenses to the standard being maintained at the county hospital in Cashel.

Lengthy instructions were issued for the regulation and management of temporary fever hospitals. It was stipulated that a separate bed should be provided for every patient and that each patient should be given a straw bed in sacking, two sheets, two blankets, a rug, a pillow and a night shirt. The straw, sheets and night shirt were to be changed once in each week. Various record books were ordered to be kept; but for the fever hospital in Fethard none has survived. Most likely they passed to a member of the local committee when that body disbanded.⁵³

The ravages of blight were not nearly so widespread or severe in 1847. Most of the potatoes normally kept for seed had been eaten, however, and the country was so demoralised that only a fraction of the usual acreage had been planted. For example, 2,500,000 acres were devoted to potatoes in 1841, but in 1847 this was reduced to 284,000. In January 1847 potato ground in Thurles was being left untilled; people were flocking to the public works. In Cashel small farms, of 15 acres and under, were totally neglected, and around Clonmel it was the same. In the south of the county larger farmers were moving from potato cultivation to grain crops.⁵⁴

The gravity of the situation was confirmed by Dr. Slattery, the Archbishop of Cashel, in his Lenten regulations issued in February 1847. He referred to the dismal state of destitution then prevalent. Because of this, in an unprecedented concession, he allowed the use of flesh meat on all days of the seven weeks of Lent except on Wednesdays and Fridays. The pastoral granted to the impoverished and the destitute permission to use whatever type of food they could obtain

each day throughout Lent. However, he placed a stringent injunction on the comfortable members of his flock, to offer relief either in food or money to the distressed and indigent.⁴⁵

In June 1847 a new Poor Law measure was enacted, making it compulsory for Poor Law Guardians to provide for all the destitute, whether or not the workhouse could accommodate them.⁴⁶ Though direct food relief did not cease until early September, the burden of relieving the victims of famine now fell directly on the Irish Poor Law system. The able-bodied were to be put to breaking stones. This was seen by the Poor Law Commissioners as being "open to the least objection because it is least likely, when well superintended, to attract labourers and draw them away from their ordinary employment". The men were required to labour at the stone quarries from eight to ten hours a day. One historian writing in modern times has described this as a "callous act, born of ideology and frustration [and] prolonging the crisis".⁴⁷

Throughout 1847 a much greater quantity of corn was imported for famine relief than was exported. Overall, some 146,000 tons of grain were exported, while the imports were 889,000 tons – mainly in wheat and Indian meal. By September 1847 the food shortage had been overcome, but "famine fever" continued to kill great numbers.⁴⁸

Other changes were also being made by the new Poor Law Act. The wardens, who had worked in a part-time capacity and were middlemen between the Board of Guardians and the poor, were to be replaced by full-time relieving officers. The Guardians were directed to appoint these officers as soon as possible and each district was to be liable for the salary of its Relieving Officer. His principal duty was to compile lists of applicants for relief for the Guardians, but in a case of urgent necessity the officer could provide immediate provisional relief.

Under this new Act all applicants for relief were to be made to the relieving officer of the district in the first instance, who would then examine each request by visiting the home of the applicant and by enquiring into the state of his health, his ability to work and his means. The officer then made a report on a prescribed form to the Board of Guardians, who then permitted the necessary relief.

His duties required that he keep a full account of all moneys received and distributed by him, and of all articles received and given out. The relieving officer was required to balance his accounts weekly and to present them to the clerk of the Union for inspection. The qualifications necessary for a relieving officer were primarily that he be competent to keep accounts, that he reside in the district for which he was appointed and that he devote his whole time to the performance of his duties.⁴⁹

The Cashel Guardians on 14 August 1847 appointed eleven Relieving Officers for the districts within the Cashel Union. The appointee for Fethard was Mr. Patrick Stokes, at a salary of £40 a year, but one of the Board members objected to him on the grounds that he was the nephew of another Guardian.⁵⁰ Eventually this appointment was referred to the Poor Law Commissioners in Dublin for arbitration who, though they found the appointment objectionable, confirmed it.⁵¹

By the Autumn of 1847 Irish famine was being seen as a permanent rather than a temporary problem. Consequently, only a permanent solution was the answer. Despite the persistence of famine conditions – there was another major potato failure in 1848, a lesser one in 1849, with distress continuing until 1850 – there were no further famine relief committees, no public works, and no soup kitchens. From this time onwards relief was dependent on the Poor Law Guardians and the workhouse.

But free outdoor relief was available to those suffering from old age, long-term illness or disability and widows with two or more dependant children, and such relief could be extended to those for whom no space could be found in the workhouse. During 1847 and 1848, to meet the new pressures placed on them, many workhouses erected temporary accommodation, or

opened auxiliary premises on sites away from the main workhouse to meet what then appeared to be a long-term need.

The basic Government assumption in the new Poor Law Act was that Irish property should pay for Irish poverty; but this policy could not be maintained. Some Unions were simply too poor to pay for their relief programme. The Government was forced to intervene, first by direct loans and later by levying a special rate-in-aid on all rateable property in Ireland to clear the debts of the poorer Unions. Many Boards of Guardians sought in every way to promote economies; after all, they represented the interests of ratepayers, indeed were themselves usually substantial ratepayers.

But economies were often achieved at considerable cost in human suffering. As well, the liability of landlords for the entire rates on all holdings below £4 valuation made them anxious to rid their estates of such expensive holdings. This meant evicting small-holders and demolishing cabins. Not surprisingly, these measures provoked sporadic rural disorder and landlords, large farmers, rent and rate collectors were intimidated (or worse) by a desperate peasantry. Finally, corruption and incompetence characterised the operations of many Unions, so that by 1850 about a quarter of them had been suspended and their functions transferred to paid officials.

In those desperate years many a poor person in Fethard must have made his way to the workhouse in Cashel so hopelessly weakened by starvation or so completely overwhelmed by disease that food and medical attention were practically useless. Many entered only to assure themselves of a decent burial. At a December 1847 meeting of the Cashel Guardians a proposal was put that premises for an additional workhouse in Fethard should be sought. The destitute could at least die among their own. Offers were received from Mr. P. Stokes, latterly appointed Relieving Officer in Fethard, Mr. R. Stokes and Mrs. Latham. At the same meeting the clerk to the Board read a letter from the Poor Law Commissioner architect stating that Mrs. Latham's house as the most suitable. It was resolved that, from Tuesday 28 December, the Guardians should hire an additional premises in Fethard for a period of from nine to twelve months.

Mr. Millett, chairman of the local relief committee, wrote to the Cashel Guardians enclosing a set of proposals that had been agreed with Mr. P. Stokes for his premises. Mr. Stokes offered these at an annual rent of £90 from 25 December, and also gave the new workhouse "the use of the Pump to supply Water for the use of the Paupers; and the use of a Boardroom for 6 months". Stokes's offer was accepted by the Guardians, and at the same meeting of 25 December Michael Geoghegan was appointed Master of the proposed new workhouse at a salary of £25 a year and his rations. The matron of the Cashel workhouse was ordered to provide 150 beds for the temporary workhouse, and the Board's clerk was requested to provide the various record books for the house. None of those has survived.⁶²

1848

On 15 January the assistant architect to the Poor Law Commissioners reported to Cashel Guardians that he considered the premises offered by Patrick Stokes the previous December unsuitable. His opinion was "that the Cost of preparing and fitting them up would be very great".⁶³ But the Guardians, possibly for reasons that were not fully in the public interest, decided that as they had possession of Stokes's premises these should be used. At this point the Guardians were also liable for the rent.

Their minute continued: "We consider the place most fit for the purpose for which we hired it, as we have got all the under portion (which Mr. Stokes refused to give when the architect,

Mr. McMullan, visited it) of the House, and it is entirely cut off from any communication with the rest of Mr. Stokes's concerns by a wall over 20 feet high which he has built by our order, together with other changes and improvements at considerable expense and inconvenience and we could not, when we hired this place, get any other suitable one unless we took Mrs. Latham's for 3 years by Lease, which we were not authorised to do".⁶⁴ In the same minute the Guardians noted that they had advertised for a Master for the new workhouse who would be appointed on 20 January.

A further Guardians meeting decided that the clerk should write to the Poor Law Commissioners seeking approval for the additional workhouses. "The Fethard Guardians consider it impossible to manage the Paupers of that district except in a Workhouse as their population is so very large, and the greater portion were seeking outdoor Relief; we are of opinion that so many would not look for outdoor Relief if there was indoor accommodation, besides it would be less expensive".⁶⁵

As ever, the destitute wished to keep their family units intact, which in those hard times they could manage while on outdoor relief. For the Guardians the consideration was to keep down expenses and reduce the burden of rates on the landholders. Fethard did not get its additional workhouse; there is no further mention of it in the Board of Guardians' Minute Books that have survived.

In 1848 Ireland was entering into its fourth successive year of famine and want. However, the Government continued to believe that the Poor Law system, together with private resources, could provide for this situation. Accordingly the Boards of Guardians were again the sole source of relief, helped by the Poor Law rates. For the first six weeks of 1848 the Admissions Register for Cashel workhouse shows that artisans such as weavers, cobblers, tailors, blacksmiths and masons were being admitted. Famine was biting deeper into the fabric of society.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, a directive was issued by the Relief Commissioners that all outdoor relief should cease on 18 March; official policy was that labour should be freely available for Spring work on the farms. On 1 March the Cashel Guardians ordered the Relieving Officers to discontinue work in the quarries in the Union and to discharge the foremen. The Fethard quarries were those of Peppardstown and Knockelly, both about two to three miles north of the town. Men working in them were employed for eight to ten hours a day, for which they received a daily ration as follows: "Each head of a family having children to get 2 lbs. of Indian meal daily, 1 lb. per each member of his family over 9 years and under 15 years and ½ lb. for each child under 9 years".⁶⁷

Instead of being discharged, it seems that gangs of men were put to repairing the Fethard to Cashel road. However, at a Guardians meeting held on 22 April a directive was issued that all foremen in charge of outdoor relief in the Fethard Electoral area be discharged and that all workmen be employed in future in breaking stones at the local fever hospital.⁶⁸

The ending of outdoor relief brought a strong protest from the men of Fethard. The Relief Commissioners inspector in Tipperary wrote to Dublin on 27 April that "a large number of men, amounting to about 150, from the electoral division of Fethard, who had been struck off the outdoor relief list, came to the door of the [Cashel] workhouse to demand relief. I had been informed by the Relieving Officer that he knew they intended to do so, and therefore I sent for some police in case they would be taken into the house when they brought a ticket from their Relieving Officer, and came with their families, but we refused to give them outdoor relief or to admit them without their families.

"The Relieving Officer for Fethard was present, who informed us that he had told them before that they could not be admitted to the house without their families; it was therefore

evidently a scheme, got up in order to try to fill the house, and thus to force on the outdoor relief. When they found the Guardians were determined about the matter they dispersed, and said they would return tomorrow with their families, but I do not think that many will do so, and if they should, I have no doubt but that we shall be able to admit them all. I am quite sure that if they do come in most of them will not remain more than a day, as it is evidently a plan, fixed upon by them, to endeavour to fill up all the available space in the workhouse".⁶⁹

Throughout this period the Cashel Guardians continued to tender for meal and provisions for Fethard's destitute. At the end of February they appointed William Maher as the contractor to supply Indian meal for one month, for which he was paid £1. 12s. 6d.⁷⁰ John Needham⁷¹ was later granted the contract and was paid £8. 11s. 6d. for the month.⁷²

For most of 1848 the fever hospital in Fethard was bedevilled by problems. In the main these were a shortage of money, largely due to the heavy financial liabilities of the Cashel Union and the small amount of the weekly rate being collected. The Guardians received a letter on 4 July from the treasurer of the hospital stating that unless money was forthcoming the contractors would no longer supply its needs. The Guardians forwarded a note for £25.

In September the Guardians resolved that an annual salary of £40 be paid to Dr. John Flynn for his attendance at the hospital.⁷³ Following a directive from the Central Board of Health, the Guardians appointed a committee of local landowners to oversee the running of the hospital.⁷⁴ However, after what was seen as overspending and a lack of financial control, this committee was suppressed by the Cashel Guardians in February 1849.⁷⁵

Because blight had not appeared in 1847 there were hopes in the Spring of 1848 that the coming potato harvest would be good. Inspectors, reporting to the Poor Law Commissioners in April, expressed optimism. However, the acreage sown continued low, demonstrating that the Irish were still cautious and fearful that the blight had not passed.

Government plans for the cessation of all financial assistance were set at naught following the potato harvest. By August 1848 blight had again appeared throughout the country, and in many places it was as virulent as that of 1846. The various Relieving Officers in the broad Fethard area submitted reports on the state of the potato crop. In Magorban and Tullamaine the blight had seriously increased to such an extent that only about one-half of the crop sown would be saved.

Cloneen and Kiltinan were affected to a lesser extent, but in Peppardstown and Drangan the disease was seriously on the increase, with most of the tubers already rotten. In the Fethard Electoral Division blight had attacked both the root and leaf of the potato and was very much on the increase.⁷⁶ By November the Cashel Guardians were advertising for a contractor to supply Indian meal to the destitute in the Fethard area.⁷⁷

With the assumption of responsibility for famine relief the Poor Law Guardians were faced with the need for rates rises. In 1848 ratepayers in the Cashel Union were being taxed at 2s 11d. in the £1 valuation. This had risen to 3s. 4d. by April 1849.⁷⁸ Elsewhere the rates varied from 2s. 2d. to 3s. 6d.

Nevertheless, by the Summer of 1848 the Cashel Union was in a crippling state financially. During July outdoor relief was costing about £330 a week; yet the total amount of rates lodged for the month was only £251, a situation that could not continue. On 12 October the Board of Guardians were dissolved and in their stead two Vice Guardians were appointed to run the Union.⁷⁹

As famine and the associated diseases continued unabated people became aware of the danger of contracting fever through contact with the bodies of the dead. So serious had this problem become that an Act was passed which empowered Boards of Guardians to make arrangements for the burial of the dead, and to meet the cost from their funds.⁸⁰

Tenders for the supply of coffins in the Fethard area were invited, and at the end of December Tim Connors had his tender accepted at the following rates.⁸¹ Coffins for persons under two years cost 2s.; for two to nine years, 2s.; for nine to 15 years, 2s. 6d.; for over 15 years, 3s. 6d. On 7 July 1849 the Guardians paid Connors £7. 1s. for coffins and again on 8 November 1849 £1. 10s. 6d.⁸² On 6 March 1847 the Commissariat Relief Office had issued a circular to local committees directing them to pay for interring the bodies of destitute persons.⁸³ There is, however, no record in the Fethard Committee's accounts of payment having been made for coffins.

The doctors of Fethard wrote to the Guardians in December 1848 requesting that the streets of Fethard be kept clean, citing an Act of 1849-50 as placing the onus for overseeing this work on the Guardians. As a result the Fethard Relieving Officer was directed to have 20 of the men on outdoor relief put to sweeping the streets.⁸⁴

As already mentioned above, a hospital for victims of typhus had been opened in Fethard in May 1847. By December 1848 the Central Board of Health were recommending its closure. Following this Cashel Guardians obtained a report on it, prepared by one of the Vice Guardians, a Mr. Frazer, who visited the hospital on Tuesday, 28 November. He wrote that "the number of inmates is 25, of whom 22 are convalescent, having 3 bad cases under treatment. The staff consist of 3 nurses and a porter at 7 shillings, besides a clerk, a number quite disproportionate to the duties of the hospital".

"The premises consist of a barn converted into a male ward, an ordinary cottier's house and a temporary shed. For these premises the extravagant rent of £1 per week is paid. The present rate of expenditure for these 25 patients, of whom but 3 appear actually in fever, is upwards of £500 a year. Meetings of the Committee are not regularly held and hence there is no systematic check on the expenditure". The Vice Guardians agreed "that it would be desirable to close the Fethard Hospital"; however, the hospital continued to function until September 1850.⁸⁵

By the year 1848 the flow of emigration was such that the shipping company, The Hibernian Packet Line, found it worthwhile to have a shipping agent, Mr. Frederick Sayers, in Fethard. In his advertisement Sayers advised clients to travel in large ships; the Hibernian Line vessels were 1,400 tons, with 14 feet of space for each passengers and facilities for cooking and fires.

Each passenger was provided with 15 lbs. of biscuit, 10 lbs. of flour, 10 lbs. of rice, 10 lbs. of meal, 10 lbs. of peas and beans, 35 lbs. of potatoes, 10 lbs. of meat, 1 pint of vinegar, 60 gallons of water, and fuel and medicines. The shipping line offered a free passage by steamer to Liverpool to join the Atlantic vessel.⁸⁶ The cost of a steerage voyage to Canada was about £3, while that to ports in the United States was from £3. 10s. to £5.

1849

Famine continued into 1849 as a report of 20 January, 1849 on conditions in the Cashel Union shows. On that date, out of a population of 69,640 (the 1841 census figure) 14,549 (or 20%) were on relief. Of these, 2,164 were in the workhouse in Cashel and the remaining 12,385 on outdoor relief.

Many small farmers in the Union area were becoming so destitute that they were offering their lands back to their landlords, allowing their stock to be sold off at what was often a low price. Others had given up their lands so as to qualify for relief. The small land proprietors were unable to pay wages and were giving no employment; in pre-Famine times these got their labour done by cottiers, using the conacre system.

The Cashel Guardians continued to supply Indian meal to Fethard's hungry. In February Peter R. Banfield was granted the contract to supply the town with meal for three months at £9. 12s. the ton. However, the local Relieving Officer complained that the quality of the meal

being supplied by Banfield was not good. The Guardians made threatening noises; but it is not known if any concrete action was taken.⁸⁷

The Vice Guardians, as part of their cost-cutting plans, decided that Fethard's fever hospital should be closed on 25 August. Patients not fully recovered should be removed to Cashel. However, this was not done until September 1850. In April the Guardians revised the Poor Law rates to 3s. 4d. in the £1 valuation. It was estimated that this would generate an income of £2,111. 9s. 10d. in the Fethard electoral Division.⁸⁸

Scarcity of food remained a problem in the Cashel Union. In May William Power was appointed contractor to supply Indian meal to the whole Union at a cost of £11 a ton. On Tuesdays Fethard received its allocation when Mr. P. Stokes, the Relieving Officer, got four tons. By mid-June this had risen to 4½ tons, but dropped to 3 tons at the end of July. By mid-August the cost of meal had fallen to £8. 10s. the ton and Stokes required only one ton.

Potatoes must again have become readily available in September, because Fethard's meal requirements in the first week was 45 hundredweights. In the second week it was seven hundredweights and by month's end nothing was needed. However, famine must not have totally disappeared, since 1,340 persons were still on outdoor relief in Cashel union.⁸⁹

On 2 May 1849 the *Tipperary Free Press* reported that "the Tipperary Market was abundantly supplied with potatoes on Saturday. All were of a sound quality. About one hundred loads at 8d. to 9d. per stone". The same paper on 4 July 1849 reported: "We have several excellent new potatoes on our market". The potato crop was described as "healthy and luxuriant".

Cholera now swept through the country. This disease was spread by dirt and contaminated food and water, and was not consequent on the Famine, though the debilitated condition of the Irish did not help in fighting it. The scourge was first recorded in December 1848, reached its peak in May 1849 and was on the decline by June of the same year.

Fethard did not escape this dreaded disease, suggesting that even after three years of fighting typhus the levels of cleanliness in the town were not good. On 1 February, to deal with this outbreak, Dr. Flynn, the local dispensary doctor, was appointed Vaccinator for Fethard by Cashel Guardians at 1s. for each successful case up to 200 and 6d. for every case above that.

By 31 March the Guardians were providing lime free to the occupiers of cabins, so that these could be whitewashed. To help in the fight against cholera the Guardians also ordered that the streets of Fethard be thoroughly cleaned and swept regularly. The town's first case of cholera was diagnosed on 28 March and the last on 10 April. In those two weeks ten people were infected, of whom nine died.⁹⁰

Agricultural prices remained depressed throughout 1849, very little business being conducted at the various fairs; even the price of fat pigs fell as the numbers available began to pick up again.

As previously mentioned, a stock of seed potatoes for the new sowing were being held aside, but what was sown appears not to have given the expected return. In the Autumn the Fethard correspondent wrote in the *Clonmel Chronicle* that "the potato blight is on the increase in this locality, and later portions of the crop is becoming diseased".⁹¹ While blight was more localised than in any year since 1845, the average crop yields were still lower than their pre-Famine levels, and the numbers on poor relief continued high.

1850

As the new year opened there were still 3,312 persons in Cashel's workhouse, and the flight from the pitiable countryside continued.⁹² The numbers in the local fever hospital also seem to have been on the increase. In December 1848 there were 25 patients, of whom only three were

ill; on 5 September 1850, when the workhouse medical officer, Dr. Heffernan, inspected the hospital he found 45 patients, of whom 29 were sick in bed and 16 convalescing. Ten of the patients were so ill that he felt it would not be safe to remove them; the rest he either discharged or had moved to the Cashel hospital.

The following week Dr. Heffernan noted that "Of the ten patients I had left in it I had four ordered to Cashel, two are in extreme danger and four are fairly promising to convalescence. These six could not by any means consistent with their safety be removed at present".⁹³ Nevertheless, on 19 September the Guardians ordered the Relieving Officer to remove all bedding, furniture and patients in Fethard hospital to the main hospital in Cashel. The nurses and porter were to be dismissed from the following Saturday. And so the temporary fever hospital in Fethard closed.⁹⁴ But fever did not, however, disappear; it was to continue as an element of concern to the town for at least another 20 years.

The potato harvest of 1850, like that of the previous year, was sound, but the over-all yield continued to decline, due to a decrease in the acreage planted and to farmers moving away from the large-scale growing of potatoes. Likewise, the general impression was that pauperism was on the decline, though as the year ended Cashel workhouse still had 3,259 persons. The figures were to continue high until September 1851 when they finally began to drop. Of those about half were children, abandoned or orphaned, in the 2-15 age-group.⁹⁵

Conclusion

When a census was taken in 1851 it was shown that Fethard had lost between one-quarter and one-third of its people. Never again would the town rise to the 1841 figure of 4,000, and for the remainder of the nineteenth century the decline was to continue. However, a small market town with an agricultural hinterland could not have sustained so high a population as that of 1841, especially with the increasing improvements in agricultural tools. Had not famine and disease done so, emigration would have taken a heavy toll.

Famine considerably changed the trading structure of Fethard, but through a new form of local government, a more powerful Catholic clergy and church, and better education, the survivors guided the modernisation of the town. Yet the comment of an English traveller will chastise all our explanations: "To think that even one human creature should, in a rich and a Christian land, die for want of a little bread, is a dreadful reflection".⁹⁶

FOOTNOTES

1. *Slater's Directory*, 1846, pp. 240-41.
2. H.C., 1845, xix, p. 12.
3. In the 1850 Valuation return Ferris is shown as having a house, a yard and 21 acres of land in Spitalfield just south of Fethard. He was minister to the Presbyterian Meeting House.
4. *Poor enquiry, Ireland, Supplement to Appendix (A)*. H.C., 1835, xxxi, p. 255.
5. *Tipperary Free Press* (hereafter TFP), 24 Sept. 1845.
6. Eamonn Lonergan, *A Workhouse Story, A history of St. Patrick's Hospital, Cashel, 1842-1992* (Clonmel, 1992), p. 20 (hereafter Lonergan).
7. *Ibid.*
8. TFP, 24 Jan. 1846.
9. National Archives (hereafter NA), Relief Commission papers, 1\2, 4540, 2\441\14.
10. 25 Feb. 1846.

11. This may have been on the site of the present-day Abymill Theatre. Between August and November 1847 Robert Harvey hired the Victorian architect, William Tinsley, to design and build the Abbey Mills. The project was never completed because of Harvey's death at the end of 1847.
12. The wife of John Wilson of Manor Mills, Fethard. He had been sovereign of the town's corporation in 1837.
13. Archdeacon Michael Laffan, born Castleiney 1791, educated Maynooth, ordained Carlow College 1814, P.P. Fethard, 1823-1861: see Skehan, *Cashel and Emly Heritage* (Abbey Books, 1993), p. 167.
14. *TFP*, 18 April and 22 April 1846.
15. 9 Victoria, c. 6. 24 March 1846.
16. *Scarcity Commission weekly reports*, H.C., 1846 (213), xxxvii, p. 8 (hereafter *Scarcity Commission*).
17. NA, Relief Commission papers, ii\2a, Tipperary, 2119, 2\422\1.
18. Protestant curate and third son of the rector, Rev. Henry Woodward, served under his father 1841-1855, then vicar of Mullingar, Dean of Down, died London 30 Sept. 1875, aged 61 years. See RCB Library Ms. 1\2\11 and *Memorials of the Dead*, v, p. 231.
19. Born Castleiney 18 Aug. 1802, younger brother of Archdeacon Michael Laffan, ordained Maynooth 1827, curate of Upperchurch, later curate Fethard 1828-1850, P.P. Holycross April 1850, Archdeacon of Cashel July 1861, died 1868. See Skehan, op. cit., p. 91.
20. Lived at Main St., Fethard where he had a business as land agent, and was a churchwarden in Holy Trinity Protestant church.
21. NA, Relief Commission papers, ii\2a, Tipperary, 2178, 2\422\1.
22. *Scarcity Commission*, p. 7.
23. Protestant rector, son of Charles Woodward, Bishop of Cloyne, born Clogher 1775, matriculated Corpus Christi College, Oxford 1792, student Lincoln's Inn 1794, ordained 1799 for diocese of Kilmore, in 1812 moved to Fethard, where he was rector until his death on 14 April 1863, married 1797 and had three sons (one of whom, Rev. Thomas, was his curate in Fethard) and two daughters, wrote an autobiography, *Some Passages in my Former Life*, published in 1847.
24. NA, Relief Commission papers, ii\2a, Tipperary, 2119, 2\422\1. The same list of subscribers was printed in *TFP*, 3 June 1846. The *Commissariat papers*, H.C., 1846 (735), xxxvii, p. 236, gave the amount collected as £359. 7s. 3d. and the Government's donation as £250.
25. Canon John O'Rourke, *The Great Irish Famine* (Dublin, 1989), p. 104 (hereafter O'Rourke).
26. *Irish Journals of Elizabeth*, 1840-50, ed. Thomson & McGasty (Oxford, 1980), p. 113 (hereafter Smith).
27. *Commissariat papers*, H.C., 1846 (735), xxxvii, p. 336.
28. NA, Relief Commission papers, iv\3, 2\422\13.
29. Lonergan, p. 24.
30. NA, Distress papers, 1846/D6563.
31. *Ibid.*, 24 Oct. 1846.
32. 9 and 10 Victoria, c. 107.
33. To support this declaration, see H.C., 1847 (764), 1, p. 120, where the numbers of persons employed on the roads in the barony of Middlethird on 3 Oct. 1846 were 64 able-bodied men, 8 infirm men, 4 boys and 11 horses.
34. NA, Distress papers, 1846\D5918.
35. NA, Distress papers. 1846\D6081.
36. NA, Relief Commission papers, ii\2a, Tipperary, 6371, 2\422\1.
37. *Ibid.*, Nos. 8395 and 8598.
38. *Commissariat papers*, H.C., 1847 (796), lii, p. 3.
39. Cashel Board of Guardians Minute Books, County Library, Thurles. 3 Sept. 1846; 7 Jan. 1847; 28 Jan. 1847 (hereafter Cashel Minutes).
40. NA, Relief commission papers, v\2, 8613, 2\422\13.
41. *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee* (Dublin, 1852), p. 178.
42. 10 and 11 Victoria, c. 7.
43. *Kilkenny Moderator*, 24 Feb. 1847.

44. *Ibid.*, 9 June 1847.
45. NA, Relief Commission papers, ii\2a, Tipperary, 9224, 2\422\1.
46. *Ibid.*, Nos. 10,719; 11,213; 12,498.
47. *Ibid.*, No. 14,469.
48. O'Rourke, pp. 239/44.
49. Sir W.P. MacArthur, "Medical History of the Famine", in *The Great Famine*, eds. R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams (Dublin, 1956), pp. 263/315.
50. 9 Victoria, c. 6, and 10 Victoria, c. 7.
51. Lonergan, p. 43; *Third report of the Relief Commissioners, Ireland*. H.C., 1847 (836), xvii, p. 8.
52. Cashel Minutes, 18 Mar. 1847.
53. *Report of the Commissioners of Health, Ireland*. H.C., 1852/53 (1562), xli, appendix (A), No. 13, pp. 57\59.
54. *Kilkenny Moderator*, 30 Jan. 1847.
55. *Kilkenny Moderator*, 17 Feb. 1847.
56. 10 Victoria, c. 31.
57. C. Ó Gráda, *The Great Irish Famine* (London, 1969), p. 46.
58. P.M.A. Bourke, "The Irish Grain Trade", in *I.H.S.*, xx, No. 78 (Sept., 1976), pp. 164\66.
59. *First annual report of the Commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*. H.C., 1847\48 (943), xxxiii, pp. 82\84.
60. The only hotel in Fethard in 1846 was owned by Patrick Stokes. Situated on the north-western end of The Square, it has been replaced by a large modern building. In the same building was a public house, but from 1856 onwards Stokes was promoting himself as a wine and spirit merchant. He represented the Cashel Board of Guardians as Relieving Officer in Fethard during the later years of the Famine, but was no longer so in 1856. A bid for the Mastership of Cashel Workhouse was not successful. It is not known when he died, but at century's end trade directories were advertising his daughter, Susan, as proprietor of the hotel. She did not marry and died in March 1910.
61. Lonergan, pp. 33\34.
62. Cashel Minutes, 18 Dec. 1847.
63. *Ibid.*, 15 Jan. 1848.
64. *Ibid.*, 15 Jan. 1848.
65. *Ibid.*, 29 Jan. 1848.
66. Lonergan, p. 38.
67. Lonergan, p. 37.
68. Cashel Minutes, 22 April 1848. *Distress papers, eighth series*, H.C., 1849 (1042), xlviii, p. 162.
69. *Relief Commission papers*, H.C., 1847\48 (955), lvi, p. 105.
70. William Maher, a spirit dealer, lived at Main St., Fethard and is listed in *Slater's Directory* for 1846. In 1856 he was recorded as William Maher and Sons, spirit dealer.
71. John Needham is listed in 1846 *Slater's Directory* as a baker in Main St., Fethard; he survived the Famine, being listed in Griffith's Valuation and *Slater's* of 1856.
72. Cashel Minutes, 26 Feb. 1848 and 22 April 1848.
73. *Ibid.*, 4 July 1848 and 23 Sept. 1848.
74. Messrs. Millett, Sankey, Cantwell, Meagher, Henderson, and O'Connor; Millett was chairman and Sankey treasurer.
75. Cashel Minutes, 1 Feb. 1849.
76. *Relief of Distress papers, seventh report*, H.C., 1947\48 (999), liv, pp. 24\25.
77. TFP, 8 Nov. 1848.
78. *Ibid.*, 22 Nov. 1848.
79. Lonergan, pp. 40\41.
80. 10 Victoria, c. 22.
81. According to *Slater's Directory* 1846, Timothy O'Connor was a carpenter in Moor St. (now Burke St.). Although cited in Griffith's 1850 Valuation List, he was not in the 1856 *Slater's Directory*, nor was the name O'Connor among the carpenters.

82. Cashel Minutes, 28 Dec. 1848; 7 July 1849; 8 Nov. 1849.
83. NA, Relief Commission papers, ii/I, 13,339, 2\441\29.
84. Cashel Minutes, 30 Nov. 1848. Lonergan, p. 43.
85. *Ibid.*, 30 Nov. 1848. Lonergan, p. 43.
86. *TFP*, 25 Nov. 1848.
87. Cashel Minutes, 15 Feb. 1849; 20 April 1849.
88. *Ibid.*, 30 April 1849.
89. *Ibid.*, 19 May 1849; 18 June 1849; 21 July 1849; 18 Aug. 1849; 1 Sept. 1849; 8 Sept. 1849; 16 Sept. 1849; and 30 Nov. 1849.
90. *Report to the Commissioners of Health, Ireland, on the epidemics of 1846 to 1850*, H.C., 1852\54 (1562), xli, p. 37; Cashel Minutes, 1 Feb. 1849; 31 Mar. 1849.
91. 18 Oct. 1849.
92. Lonergan, p. 51.
93. Lonergan, p. 55.
94. *Ibid.*
95. *Ibid.*, pp. 57, 64.
96. O'Rourke, p. 143.