

Unveiling of Famine Memorial

The memorial stone being unveiled today carries a picture of Pat McNamara's Cabin (see front cover) along with the description by Capt. Wynne, the Poor Law Inspector for the Ennis Union, of the harrowing effects of Famine, which he witnessed on Christmas Eve 1846 in the parish:

'I must, however, again call your attention to the appalling state in which Clare Abbey is at present. I ventured through that parish this day and although not a man easily moved, I confess myself unmanned by the extent and intensity of the suffering I witnessed, more especially among the women and children, crowds of whom were to be seen scattered over the turnip fields like a flock of famished crows, devouring the raw turnips; mothers half naked, shivering in the snow and sleet, uttering exclamations of despair, whilst their children were screaming with hunger; I am a match for anything I may meet here, but this I cannot stand.'

Design By Eric Shaw - Script by Dr Joe Power

Clarecastle Heritage and Wildlife Team is a sub-committee of Clarecastle Community Development - Their aim is to source, collect & publish Cultural, Historical, Wildlife and Natural Amenities material in order to raise awareness and to aid preservation of knowledge and amenities'.

Its members are Christy Leyden, Eric Shaw, Dr. Joe Power, Dr. Catherine O'Connor, Gerry Breen, Michael Sheedy, Eddie Connors, Paddy Connors, Frank Barry, John Power, Fr. Harry Brady and Jean Ryan.



Sunday 21st July 2013

The Famine in Clare Abbey and Killone

The Famine had a devastating impact in the parish of Clare Abbey and Killone. Relief committees were set up in both parts of the parish, with the Catholic and Protestant clergy taking a prominent role. Petitions were organised and sent to the government seeking relief works not charity. The relief committee in Clare Abbey raised local subscriptions and used these funds to give employment to over 80 unemployed men. The men worked at road repairs in Clare Abbey, Killow and in Manus. They were paid about 10d per day. In the Killone area of the parish about 100 men were employed in drainage works. The government only donated £60 to the relief committees.

As the food crisis worsened, the price of food increased sharply and, though food was plentiful, the poor had no means to buy it. The employments organised by the relief committees were clearly inadequate, and, as reports of the second potato failure were broadcast, the people became very alarmed. Early in July there were reports of 'frightful distress' in the village of Clare. The people were said to be 'distracted, wild and furious.'

The government organised public works schemes in September 1846. More than 400 jobs were offered by the Board of Works at Clare Abbey, but such was the demand for relief that more than 700 turned up for work, with massive intimidation of overseers.

Food riots became frequent and mobs of between 400 and 500 starving people began to attack grain ships at the quayside. Between October and November 1846 there were serious disruptions of trade through the port and a 'reign of terror' prevailed in the village. The authorities used the army and police under the Riot Act to keep the peace, with the workers crying out: 'we would rather die than starve!'

When, Mr Hennessy, the overseer at the public works at Clare Abbey was fired upon and wounded on 5 December 1846, the public works scheme was suspended as a punitive measure. Starvation was inevitable as the works were closed down for more than three weeks.

Capt. Wynne, the Poor Law Inspector for the Ennis Union, described in harrowing detail the effects of Famine, which he witnessed on Christmas Eve 1846 in the parish:

I must, however, again call your attention to the appalling state in which Clare Abbey is at present. I ventured through that parish this day and although not a man easily moved, I confess myself unmanned by the extent and intensity of the suffering I witnessed, more especially among the women and children, crowds of whom were to be seen scattered over the turnip fields like a flock of famished crows, devouring the raw turnips; mothers half naked, shivering in the snow and sleet, uttering exclamations of despair, whilst their children were screaming with hunger; I am a match for anything I may meet here, but this I cannot stand.'

The public works were re-opened on 28 December after the people had been taught a harsh lesson. Conditions had got so bad that a soup kitchen was opened at the local army barracks in January 1847 to feed the poorest people. Then, an official soup kitchen was opened in the village in early February 1847. By March 1847 more than 4,000 people, that is about two thirds of the population of the parish, were receiving daily rations of soup. The soup consisted of a mixture of meal and vegetables, with about one pound per adult and half a pound for those under 15. The public soup kitchens operated up to 15 September 1847.

After two years of famine the number of deaths from diseases such as typhus, dysentery, fever and scurvy began to increase sharply, affecting all classes in society, including the parish priest, Fr Patrick O'Gorman. A dreaded outbreak of cholera struck in March 1849, which killed at least 17 people in the parish.

The Ennis Union opened auxiliary workhouses in the village, one at Bannatynes's corn store in the Pound in August 1848 and the second at Scott's corn store beside the quay in October 1848. Soon the auxiliary workhouses were overcrowded. Workhouse meals consisted of a daily ration of sixteen ounces of rye and barley bread with one pint of oatmeal vegetable soup. It seems that the workhouses in the village were used to house women and girls only, as it was reported that more than 380 girls were accommodated in a dormitory room, capable of holding about eighty!

A scheme of 'outdoor relief' was set up to compliment the workhouses and to compensate for the closure of the soup kitchens and public works. The outdoor relief consisted of half a stone of meal per week for those over 15 and a quarter stone of meal for those under 15. By January 1849 a total of 1,794 inhabitants were getting outdoor relief.

Some welcome famine charity came from outside agencies such as the Society of Friends, who sent bags of meal, and a sum of more than £28 was collected in Martinsburg, Virginia, USA for distribution among the poor of the parish.

Widespread evictions took place both in the rural parts of Clare Abbey and Killone and in the village of Clare during the years 1849 and 1850. One reporter noted in the Limerick and Clare Examiner in July 1849: 'saw ruins all the way, house wrecking, cot crushing, man-killing and starving... I saw gables still remaining and corn set on floors where innocence and infancy once lived and moved in joy'. Another report in the Illustrated London News of 5 January 1850 noted that the village of Clear had been 'destroyed within a few weeks... the sketch of the cabin of Pat McNamara shows the condition of the village.'

The population in the parish was also seriously affected by a collapse in the birth rate. There was a rapid and continuous decline of births in the parish from about 200 per annum around 1840 to a low of only 36 births in 1850. The decline in fertility obviously affected the poorest sector of the population in impoverished townlands such as the Commons in the village of Clare.

The census statistics for the year 1851 show the profound impact of the Famine upon the parish. The population of the parish fell from 6,057 to 4,160, a reduction of about 33%. The number of houses fell from 945 to 673; this was a reduction of about 28%. One could reasonably assume that about one thousand people from Clare Abbey and Killone died from hunger and famine-related diseases and about a thousand emigrated between the years 1845 and 1850.