

# THE GREAT FAMINE

## Some correspondence relating to Social Conditions in the Loughbrickland Area 1840-1850

By JOHN J. SANDS

The following letters hitherto unpublished are taken from the correspondence of the Whyte family of Loughbrickland. The family are descended directly from Walter Whyte, a Norman Knight who landed at Baginbun, Co. Wexford with Strongbow's forces in 1169.

In 1704 John Whyte of Leixlip, Co. Kildare, married Mary Purcell who was heiress to part of the Loughbrickland estate, granted to Sir Marmaduke Whitechurch in 1610, for his services during the

O'Neill Wars in Ulster. This part of the estate was referred to for many years as "The Lady Purcell's Estate". The Whytes were "absentee" landlords up to 1830, following careers in the army and navy, and appointing agents to manage their estate for them. In that year however, Nicholas Charles Whyte came to reside in Loughbrickland. He it was who had the local Catholic Church built in 1829. His son, John Joseph, a minor, came into possession of the estate on the death of his father in 1844.

(1.)

Banbridge  
21st March, 1843

My dear Sir,

On looking at Coolnacran Bog. I think it would be imprudent to allow any more turf to be cut in it but to have it levelled and put into meadows. So that I think the best way to do it is to let it to some person who will labour it. I have been offered by Mr. Doran and Mr. Andrew Irwin for to take the whole four acres at £1 per acre for a term of 20 years. I think 20 yeas too long a time but think if they would give 30s. an acre I think you might give a lease of 20 years but I would not give 20 years at less than 30s. You might give a lease of 10 years at £1.

Mr. Doran wishes to know what rent you will charge him for the house lately built, it has formerly paid £10 10s but he objects to so high a price.

I hope next week to send you some money.

I have signed Mr. Pepper's deed so that now I must look to all their demands. Let me have money from you in October. I must pay it or he will proceed on it.

Mrs. Magee is I think a shade better but still in a very precarious state, she is weak, scarcely able to walk, but I am afraid we will be obliged to take her to Dublin — I hope Mrs. Whyte and the children are better.

The people are very poor in this country. I hope we may have some better trade.

From Charles Magee (agent for Nicholas C. Whyte).

**Note 1:**

Nicholas Chas Whyte, who had left Loughbrickland to take up residence in Plymouth, hired Charles Magee, as his agent, to manage his estates in Co Down

He died in Plymouth on 4th February, 1844 and was buried in Loughbrickland R C Church which he had founded fifteen years earlier

**COOLNACRAN BOG:**

A little poor class turf-mould from this bog was still being compressed and used as fuel by the villagers in Loughbrickland during the First World War 1914-1918

**(2.)**

Letter dated Banbridge 14th October, 1845

In this letter from Charles Magee, who was Whyte's agent, he states that "the harvest here", that is, round Loughbrickland, "is very late" and he is "sorry to say that the potato crop is much injured"

To Mrs Nicholas Charles Whyte,  
Plymouth England

**Note 2:**

Magee also states in this letter that corn yields about 15 cwt. to the acre here, and that the land is unsuitable for the growing of wheat

**(3.)****(Famine Relief Correspondence)**

LOUGHBRICKLAND

15th October, 1846

Sir,

May I request you to forward to my address the papers referred to in the 14th paragraph of "Instructions for the Formation and Guidance of Committees for the Relief of Distress in Ireland"

I also request accurate information as to the probable proportion to be paid by the Landlord and Tenant respectively, of the sums borrowed from the Government, and also the interest to be paid on same

Your Obedt Sert

John Doran PP, Loughbrickland

To Commissary General  
Relief Commission Stamp October 17th, 1846

**Note 3:**

By this date Famine and Typhus Fever were raging in this area. In the month of December 1846, there were 15 funerals from the two Catholic Churches in Aghaderg and in 1847 the total number of deaths was more than double that of any other year

Father John Doran, a native of Aghaderg, was ordained in 1834. He was Parish Priest of Aghaderg during the decade 1840-1850, the years of the Famine

(4.)

Loughbrickland  
16th October 1846

The Rev Mr Breakey of Loughbrickland, Co Down begs most respectfully to say that he will feel greatly indebted to the Commissary General should he have a copy of an "Act 9th and 10th Victoria 107 for Relief Works" forwarded to him

Mr B thinks it would prove valuable for direction to himself and others in making provision for the unemployed and destitute of this neighbourhood and district in which he resides, in the present lamentable condition of the labouring classes

**Note 4:**

Mr Breakey was Presbyterian Minister

Banbridge Union Workhouse calculated to contain 800

Inmates on 30th January, 1847 — 950

The Workhouse in Banbridge was packed to capacity by this date, and many ailing people were being refused admission

(5.)

**(Famine Relief)**

To W I Stanley Esq ,  
Commissarial Relief Office,  
Castle, Dublin

Loughbrickland  
18th October, 1846

Sir,

In reply to your letter of yesterday's date I have the honour to inform you that I applied for the "Acts and Papers" in my former note, as a **Member of a Relief Committee**, sitting in Loughbrickland And as we intend to have a Public Meeting here, on next Wednesday, with the view of ascertaining the amount of destitution in this District, and if necessary to apply to the Lord Lieutenant for "An Extraordinary Presentment Session", I beg leave to renew my application for the aforesaid "Acts and Papers" for our future guidance I shall make the enquiries as you suggest at the Office of the **Board of Works**

I have the honour to be Sir

Your obedient Servt  
John Doran P P, Aghaderg,  
Loughbrickland, Co Down

Reply 24th October, 1846

F. Foy.

**Note 5:**

There seemed to be much confusion about the legal set-up of a Famine Relief Committee.

The Government in Dublin Castle insisted on having some of their Nominees on the Committee to over-look the whole operation as they gave a grant equal to that collected by Charitable Means in any Parish. Banbridge and Seapatruck collected just over £1,000 by public subscription and the authorities in Dublin Castle forwarded another £1,000.

(6.)

**Late Summer 1847**

To Robert L. Alexander Esq.

Sir,

We cannot in justice to ourselves allow the Loughbrickland Relief Committee to be dissolved without conveying to you our strong feelings of gratitude for the untiring exertions with which you laboured among us during the last winter for the relief of the poor and afflicted in our Parish.

Your property not lying in this neighbourhood must prevent our regarding as by any means a common case the kind feelings which urged you to such exertions at so great a cost of time and trouble — many under similar circumstances would have considered themselves quite exempted from such claims, while you on the contrary devoted yourself with indefatigable energy to the providing of funds for the relief of the poor and destitute in searching out those whose wants were most urgent and often times to ministering with your own hands to their necessities.

We cannot by these or any other expressions which we can use attempt to recompense such services nor would you, we are sure wish for any recompense, except that one which so far exceeds every other and which you must already enjoy — the blessing of an approving conscience, the prayers of the poor and needy and the favour of him who has said “It is more blessed to give than to receive”

Jeffrey Lefroy, Rector of Aghaderg

Rev. Edmund Breakey, Presbyterian Minister

John Doran, P. Priest, Aghaderg

James Rodgers, Presbyterian Minister

William Fivey, James Morrison, Bernard Mooney, C.C.

John Temple Reilly, Aghaderg

Robert Dickson

E. McIlveen, John McClelland, Greenan

Nathaniel O’Flaherty, James Elliott, Curate Aghaderg

John McKain, Surgeon: Wm. Bird Irish Constabulary Scarva

James Mollan, Thomas Mackey, Inspector, Drumsallagh

**Note 6:**

All the Churches co-operated in an effort to minimize the hardships of the Poor.

The Chairman of Aghaderg Relief Committee was John Temple Reilly (Scarva) and the Secretary was Robert Alexander.

By Summer 1847 the worst effects of the Famine has passed but on 22nd October, 1847 Fr. Bernard Mooney the Catholic Curate of Aghaderg died from Typhus Fever and was buried under the sanctuary in Lisnagade Church.

(7.)

27th April, 1848

Dear Mr. Kelly,

I this morning received your letter and I am sorry to hear the tenants are not able to pay. I shall be able to see you on Saturday at 10 o'clock. I hope you can come out to us in the evening.

Would you be kind enough to bring the Rental I gave you with the payments to Mr. Magee.

Believe me,  
truly yours,  
John J. Whyte.

J. P. Kelly Esq.

Ref: Document No. D2918/3/7/154

**Note 7:**

John Joseph Whyte, still a minor, inherited the Loughbrickland Estates when his father Nicholas Chas. Whyte died in 1844.

J. P. Kelly had succeeded Charles Magee as agent for the Estate.

(8.)

Banbridge  
March 7th, 1849

To: J. P. Kelly Esq.

Sir

I have been through all Mr. Whyte's property since you left here and I have impressed on his tenantry the vital necessity of adopting different crops and a different system of cultivation to that at present followed by them. There are some who will on a small scale make a step in the right direction but indeed they are few, from some of them I would expect more than they are inclined to do, from their intelligence and shrewdness, but there are others who though well inclined to follow good system of farming are incapacitated from want of means to do even anything on their holdings, they have to work at their trades to keep body and soul together in their families, hence the land must be in a great measure or altogether neglected, to be candid things are very near as bad as in the West of Ireland some twelve months ago and were it not for the Manufactories along the Bann, they would be now in the same level with the people of that district.

Up to the present time I have been under considerable expense in travelling to and from this county and for board and lodgings, in fact I have spent part of my capital along with my salary although I did not go to any extraordinary expense at any time or place. So far it is a losing game to me and before matters get worse or things go further if you cannot afford me expenses I must resign and seek for something I can live by without drawing on my capital.

The people are very industrious and persevering generally speaking, their land is very dear it's quality considered, but the Tenant Right has made a great change in it for the better. This Tenant Right for the future will be rather a curse than a blessing to them, it is not within the range of my business to enter into any explanation but whoever said before the Land Commission if the system of ejecting followed in other parts of Ireland was put into operation in County Down that it would soon become a Tipperary was no false prophet. I plainly foresee it and I was given to understand as much yesterday.

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These ejectments and house levellings are the talk of the whole country and I declare I feel myself placed in a very unenviable position stranger as I am among them

I now proceed to give you a list from each townland of those who (from all I could understand from their management, and the appearance of everything on their farms) I should say are not capable of holding their farms long I may perhaps be mistaken in some of them but if the land was given without rent or taxes to three fourths of them they could not make it produce what would support their families through the year

I am Sir,  
Your obedient humble servant,  
P O'Connor, Agriculturist

**Note 8:**

Even though the linen industry provided much work in the Banbridge Area, evictions and house levellings still show the extreme poverty that existed

(9.)

Dunleer  
14th March, 1848

Dear Sir,

The only day coach that leaves Dundalk now is the day Mail which leaves about 12 o'clock I enclose O'Connor, the Agriculturist's letter When you go down you can enquire and satisfy yourself of the correctness of his report, at the same time do not let it get abroad that either he or I are **exterminators**. It is a dangerous and difficult task to make such changes in the landed property of the country as will meet the altered circumstances of the times, but it must be done, **but as quietly and cautiously as possible**. I will go over the property again very soon and will give a supply of seeds for grass and root crops to those who appear to require them I will also give assistance to purchase manure where it is required

I find I have not got Mr Magee's Rental and enclose your letter to me desiring me to bring it up to you I fear from the account you gave me when last in town that I have debited myself with a part of the rents that he received but this I cannot be sure of until I get the Rental

With regard to Mr Doran I would advise your dealing liberally with him, indeed he always acknowledged that your Father, Mother and yourself were most generous and kind to him

I am, Dear Sir,  
Your very faithful obedient J P Kelly

To John Joseph Whyte, Esq ,  
c/o Mary Louise Whyte,  
2 Mulgrave Place,  
PLYMOUTH

**Note 9:**

By this time many tenants could not pay their rent here and were being evicted Kelly and the new adviser P O'Connor, evidently did not like to take the blame as they might have to face the wrath of enraged tenants

## (10.)

Newry  
7th January, 1850

To J P Kelly Esq

My dear friend,

Don't mind the rascals. They don't try this game with their own friends who are not doing so much for them as you. They would not attempt this with you if you were resident among them. They think to frighten you, and I am sorry to have some reason to believe that there is a Catholic at the head of their movement. Go on "Never minding them" — keep this letter quiet — watch your hours however when in Banbridge and stay little in it. Be cautious nevertheless in pressing your ejections, you cannot lose much by a little caution. The property is not half as badly off as the other estates round it. These are my opinions and I would act upon them. Greatly obliged for your personal kindness.

I remain my dear friend,  
truly yours,  
John Doran, P.P., Aghaderg

**Note 10:**

It was dangerous to be Landlord's Agent after the Famine as this friendly warning shows only too clearly.

## (11.)

Date 1850 (Approx )

In a letter to John Joseph Whyte to petition for a reduction in their rents the Tenants say "The last three or four years of unprecedented distress, the failure of the potatoe as also the general depression in the prices of agricultural produce of all kinds have left your Petitioners unable to pay their present Rents"

"We have been reduced to a state bordering on Pauperism, who some time ago were pretty comfortable"

"For the Health, Prosperity and Happiness of your Honour we ever Pray"

**Note 11:**

This petition was signed by forty-one tenants in the townlands of Ballydown, Doughery and Tullyear.