

# THE SUNDIALS OF THOMAS MCCREASH

BY FRANK WATTERS

TWO of the churches in Poyntzpass village, Acton Church of Ireland Parish Church and St Joseph's Catholic Church, have an unusual link, for on each building is a slate sundial which was made by Thomas McCreash almost two hundred years ago. In his *Notes on the Parish of Ballymore*, T.G.F. Patterson states that the sundial-maker, Thomas McCreash *was the first teacher in Poyntzpass Chapel School*. (The *'Chapel School'*, said to have been established in 1813 on the site now occupied by St Joseph's Parochial Hall, has evolved into the present-day St Joseph and St James's Primary School.)



**The sundial on Acton Parish Church**

Patterson based his assertion on an entry in the *'Report into the state of Education'* of 1826. The report recorded that in that year Thomas McCreash was the teacher in Poyntzpass Chapel School.

At the time of writing, only four other examples of Thomas McCreash's work as a sundial-maker are known. As well as the two mentioned, there are McCreash sundials on St Patrick's Church Ballyargan and the Church of the Immaculate Conception Lissummon and two others are in private ownership – one made for Felix Cassedy (*sic*) of Aughantaraghan and the other for Bernard Books (*sic*) of Knockanarney, Jerrettspass.

All of the sundials are dated and cover the period from 1817 to 1834. The sundial on St Joseph's Church (1817) is the earliest known example of McCreash's work while

the Bernard Books dial (1834) is the latest example of which we know.

The sundial on St Joseph's Church was made for "*The Reverend Mr Henry Campbell*" who was the parish priest of Ballymore and Mullabrack during the period 1798 – 1819. It was during this period that the Chapel School was established.

The sundial on Acton Parish Church bears the date, March 29, 1819 and was made for Rev Henry Ashe, Rector of Acton Parish (1799–1824), who donated it to Acton Parish. The Felix Cassedy dial made in 1821 is now in the possession of his descendants, the Daly family of Aghantaraghan.

The sundial on St Patrick's Ballyargan is dated 1826 and was made for Henry Campbell's successor as Parish Priest, Rev Arthur McGuirk, while that on Lissummon chapel, which is dated 1828, was made for Rev Bernard Loughran who was Parish Priest in Lower Killeavey at that time. The sundial commissioned by Bernard Books (as the family name was spelled at the time) is now in the possession of his great-great-granddaughter Miss Maureen Brooks of Knockanarney.



**The earliest McCreash sundial on St. Joseph's Church, Poyntzpass**

The four sundials, which were made for the churches, are all south-vertical sundials. That is to say, that each was made to be fixed onto a south-facing wall. The Bernard

Books and Felix Cassedy sundials, on the other hand, are horizontal sundials intended to be placed flat on top of a plinth in a garden. Unlike the vertical dials they include the cardinal points. Otherwise, the vertical sundials are mirror-images of the horizontal dials. All six McCreash sundials are made to show the time, at five-minute intervals, between 4 a.m. and 8 p.m.



**The sundial made for Felix Cassedy in 1821**

Our divisions of time mostly have their origins in natural occurrences. The length of our year is dictated by the earth's revolution round the sun. Our day is the time taken by the earth to rotate on its axis, and our month, originally, by the time approximately from one new moon to the next. Our week, on the other hand, has its origins in the Bible's account of the six days of creation plus the day of rest. Hours, minutes and seconds, however, came from the Sumerians / Mesopotamians about 3000BC. They based their numerology on '60'; hence, for example, 360 degrees in one revolution. It is inconceivable that if it was being done now that a day would be divided into 24 sections called hours, each of those into sixty pieces called minutes and each of the latter into sixty again. In this metric age we would have a handier option.

The present age seems to be obsessed with minutely accurate time. Some time ago there was a problem with the time signal on BBC digital television. It was two-fifths of a second slow. This appeared to be a serious matter to some viewers and the BBC issued a statement apologising and saying that they were aware of the problem and were taking urgent measures to rectify it. This need for accuracy wasn't always so.

One hundred and fifty years ago, among the common people locally, clocks were rare and watches were practically unknown. This lack of familiarity was very graphically illustrated by an entry in James Bennet's unpublished 'memoirs', quoted in a talk given to this Society by Michael Anderson, to the effect that a local man named Jem Buckley, found a watch and, 'thinking it was a frog, he killed it!'. Jem Buckley died in 1849.

In the era before Greenwich Mean Time had been adopted for the whole of the British Isles, almost every town or city had its own time, often more or less sundial or solar-time. The problem with sundial-time is that significant daily events – sunrise, noon and sunset – occur later as you travel from east to west. For example, solar-noon in Birmingham is 6 minutes after solar-noon in London, while Glasgow is 9 minutes later than Birmingham. Belfast, Dublin and Cork are, respectively, 23, 24 and 29 minutes after London. Interestingly, lighting-up times in various regions throughout the UK are today set by solar time, sunrise and sunset in each location.

In the days when the pace of life was slow this lack of uniformity was not a serious matter. However with the coming of the railways the need for accurate standard time-keeping became more pressing. A railway often had a problem in that the time at one end of the line differed significantly from that at the other end. In the case of the Great Western, along its track from London to Bristol there were various different local times and Bristol time was 10 minutes behind London time. By the 1840's many railway companies adopted London time consistently at all their stations and on their timetables and in 1847 all railways were recommended to adopt Greenwich time. In 1880 Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) was made the legal time for Great Britain and 'Dublin Mean Time' became the legal time for Ireland. Dublin Mean Time



**The sundial made for Lisummon Chapel in 1828**

was 25 minutes and 21 seconds behind GMT. In 1911 Edward McCaffrey correctly noted in his diary, part of which was reprinted in an earlier edition of *'Before I forget..'*, that, when returning from England to Belfast, 'I had to re-set my watch as the time in Ireland was 25 minutes behind that in England.

The vast majority of country people would not have had a clock or watch and those they had were not reliable and

were often set almost at random. In some areas where there was clock on the village church, all locals took it as correct, although often it was not. People working in the fields took note of the sun's position or relied on such events as the ringing of the Angelus bell at noon and in the evening, or the children getting out of school, for the time. Worshipers were called to church by the ringing of the bell and workers in the fields were often summoned at dinnertime by ringing a bell or blowing a whistle. Factory workers in towns were summoned by the mill horn. The famous 'one o'clock gun' in Edinburgh was copied in various towns, a local example being Banbridge where the clock-maker and jeweller, George Armstrong fired a miniature cannon at one o'clock each day so that locals could adjust their clocks accordingly. So it was only with the coming of the railway that accurate time keeping became really important and watches and clocks began to be common, reliable and synchronised.

The poet Patrick Kavanagh wrote in his autobiographical novel *'The Green Fool'* that his father had the only clock in the townland of Mucker, near Inniskeen, Co. Monaghan, where Kavanagh was reared. It was a very old clock that had cost him half a crown at an auction. He set it by the half-past-three train, which he believed to be very reliable. Kavanagh remembered that many of the neighbours passing their house called in to inquire the time.

He then continues, *"At the other end of the Mucker Road, out of sight of the railway, was another clock. It wasn't very reliable as it was set by the bread cart. The 'Bumper' Rooney, the bread server, was sometimes late and sometimes early. Our clock was dependable, never more than a half-hour fast or slow. In any case time hardly mattered much. The sun rose and set in a land of dreams whether the clocks were right or wrong."*

T.G.F. Patterson in his *'Notes on the Parish of Ballymore'*, may have had other information about Thomas McCreash but does not record it. However, as will become clear later, we now know that, as there were two people of that name living the Poyntzpass area at that time, the possibility arises that the teacher, Thomas McCreash, was not the sundial maker.

However, accepting for the moment, that Patterson was correct, the question arises, *'Was Thomas McCreash a teacher who sculpted sundials as a hobby, or a sculptor who taught as a sideline?'* There is some evidence to suggest that the latter is the more likely.

The Chapel School had been established in 1813. The *'Report'* of 1826 states that the schoolmaster Thomas McCreash had a salary of £16 per annum, made up of school fees paid by pupils. There were, in that year, only 24 pupils attending the school. School fees were notoriously rarely paid regularly, or in full, if at all, and



***The Bernard 'Books' Sundial - The last known example of McCreash's work.***

so for a village schoolmaster another source of income would have been not only desirable but also virtually essential.

It seems unlikely that someone as obviously skilled as McCreash was, would confine himself to making six sundials in 17 years. However, it seems that his sundials were by no means cheap. An entry in the Parish of Acton Register, records that the sundial on Acton Parish Church, cost the Rev Henry Ashe the sum of £4-2s-6d. This was a considerable sum in those days and, when you consider that in 1826 schoolmaster Thomas McCreash's annual salary was a mere £16, a sundial was obviously a luxury few could afford.



***The Gnomon on the 'Books' Sundial***

So is it possible that Thomas McCreash supplemented his income in other ways? There are several large slate headstones in St Joseph's graveyard, another in Ballyrgan and two in Lissummon dating from the period 1814 to 1837, almost exactly the period covered by the sundials, which were undoubtedly the work of the same sculptor. Two of these headstones, one in Poyntzpass and the other in Lissummon, were actually commissioned by the same person, John Downey. That in Poyntzpass is in memory of his father, while that in Lissummon is in memory of his grandparents. These are certainly the work of the same individual. Similarities

between these headstones and some of the symbols on the sundials suggest that these old headstones may also be examples of Thomas McCreash's workmanship. Unfortunately none of them is signed.

The large, very heavy slates, which became headstones, were probably imported from Wales and transported to Poyntzpass by canal barge to be inscribed on or near the site of the grave. So it is possible that Thomas McCreash was, first and foremost, a skilled monumental sculptor, who supplemented his income by teaching. He was obviously both literate and numerate and by the standards of the time eminently qualified to teach in a village school.

At that period, education was completely unregulated. Quite literally any person could open a school, anywhere. This state of affairs was not peculiar to Ireland. The scandalous state of schooling in Victorian England is a theme dealt with by Dickens in *Nicholas Nickleby* and the *hedge schools* in Ireland of the period are well documented. They were held in all kinds of locations with the teacher, nearly always a man, often possessing no formal qualifications and ranging from the semi-literate ruffian like Wackford Squeers in *Nicholas Nickleby*, to the learned and accomplished schoolmaster of Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*.

As the surname does not occur locally now, it has been suggested that Thomas McCreash was not a native of the area. However, the surname –variously spelt– did occur here in lists of Freeholders, tithe returns and church records from the late eighteenth up to the early twentieth century. Various branches of the family are mentioned living in Aghantaraghan, Ballyshielmore, Carrickbrack, Tullynacross, Monclone and Druminargal. So the surname McCreash was well established and relatively common in the Poyntzpass area at that time.

A very frustrating feature of these various references to the surname is that there is insufficient evidence to form any coherent family tree. The recurrence of Christian names such as Owen and Ellen strongly suggest a close relationship but there are many missing links.

So far, it has not been possible to establish a firm connection between any one branch of the family and Thomas McCreash, sundial maker and teacher, although some connection seems likely. Usually in these circumstances there is some 'folk memory' of a name no longer found in the area but I have been able to find no record of the name 'McCreash' in field names or other memory in Aghantaraghan where the family was once so numerically strong. *Ellen McCreash's house* in Monclone was recently demolished to make way for a new building but Rose McCreash's is still occupied in Monclone Lane. A small cave in Monclone townland, sometimes referred to as *Redmond O'Hanlon's Cave* is also known as *Ellen McCreash's cave*.



***The Gnomon on the St. Joseph's Church Sundial was probably made by the local blacksmith***

Surprisingly, given Thomas McCreash's skill as a sculptor and the numerous members of the family living here at the time, there is no headstone to any McCreash in any of the local graveyards, nor is there any record of a family burying ground.

There was wholesale emigration from the area in the years following the great famine. The population of the area and of the townlands in which branches of the McCreash family lived was drastically reduced. During this period a great many names once common disappeared from the locality. This was graphically illustrated by the list in the *James Bennet Memoirs* referred to earlier. Several dozen local surnames of residents he recorded in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century no longer occur here.

In the townlands where branches of the McCreash family lived this fall was very marked. The population of Aghantaraghan fell by almost 80%, from 550 in 1841 to 118 in 1901. The number of households fell in the same period from 98 to 35. The figures for the townland of Demone showed a similar dramatic decrease with the population falling from 201 in 1841 to just 59 by the end of the century, a fall of over 70%. In the case of Monclone townland the population shrank from 266 in 1841 to 61 in 1901, a fall of 77%. These figures are typical of the whole area.

Those who emigrated were predominately the younger generation and many family names, once common locally, vanished completely during that period. Strangely, all the McCreash children whose baptisms are recorded in the church records were girls the one exception being a son of Owen McCreash's who apparently died at a very early age. This combination of factors, coupled perhaps with an exodus of younger members of the McCreash family and perhaps a bachelor or two remaining, may have led to the McCreash name disappearing in this locality.

When, exactly, Thomas McCreash retired or resigned as teacher is not clear, but we do know that he had been replaced by April 1832. At that point, when the then Parish Priest, Rev John Coyne, applied to the newly established Commissioners of Irish Education seeking to have Poyntzpass Chapel School granted National School status, the teacher was Patrick Conroy. Patrick Conroy's qualifications appear to have been fairly basic for the application stated that he '... *had received some instruction at the Belfast Institution.*' However, while this qualification may seem vague, it was a significantly more formal qualification than Thomas McCreash had and it is just possible that he was replaced as teacher by Patrick Conroy to strengthen the Chapel School's case for recognition by the National Schools' Board.

An unofficial list of deaths in the Poyntzpass area, kept by a member of the Bennet family and now in the PRONI, includes an entry stating that a Thomas McCreash died in 1831. However this cannot have been the sundial maker for the Thomas McCreash of our study made a sundial for Bernard Books in 1834. According to St Joseph's Church records a Thomas McCreash acted as witness at the marriage of Pat McCreesh and Margaret Maguile on 29<sup>th</sup> April that same year, 1834. It is tempting therefore to conclude that the Thomas who died in 1831 was the schoolmaster, who had been replaced by Patrick Conroy by the time of the National School application of 1832, and that this latter Thomas, who acted as witness in 1834, was the sundial maker.

However James Bennet, in his *Memoirs* gives it seems, conclusive backing to Patterson. Written around 1880, the writer states that Thomas McCreash had been "*schoolmaster for many, many years in the Chapel School. He was considered to be a clever man. It was he who made the sundials that are on the church and chapel. As far as I remember he was lame of one leg. He died around 1850. He lived in Church Street*".

However the fact that Thomas McCreash '*lived in Church Street*' is particularly unhelpful for it doesn't connect him to any of the branches of the McCreash family we have identified in various townlands.

Church records show that the father of twin daughters baptised in 1801 was Thomas McCreash. If we presume that he was the schoolmaster, we could suggest that he was probably born around 1770. This would mean that he had retired from teaching when he was about 60 and that he was around 80 years of age when he died in 1850. It is also possible that the Thomas McCreash, who died in 1831, was the schoolmaster's father.

While you might presume that a rough sundial could be constructed by pushing a stick into the ground and observing the movement of its shadow, there is more to



***A detail from the Ballyargan dial***

it than that, for to make an accurate sundial requires considerable knowledge of mathematics, geometry and astronomy.

The earliest sundials date from 1500BC in ancient Egypt and they were common by Roman times. In order for a sundial to be accurate it must be made for the place in which it is to be erected, and the angle of the *gnomon* (the 'stick' which casts the shadow) must be such that it points precisely to the pole star. This discovery was apparently made in the first century AD. Even the most accurately constructed sundial has obvious limitations as a timepiece as it only functions during daylight hours and when there is sunshine enough to cast a shadow.

None of the McCreash sundials is now in its original position. Today the sundial made for Acton Parish Church, in 1819, is on the church tower, which was not built until about 1829. Old photographs of St Joseph's Church confirm that its sundial has been moved at least once, while the present day churches in Ballyargan and Lissummon are new buildings, on new sites, dating from



***The Gnomon on the Lissummon sundial***



### ***A detail from the Lissummon sundial***

1932 and 1933 respectively. A photograph of the old Ballyargan Chapel, taken around 1905, shows the sundial in place but it appears that during renovations to the building in 1907 it was removed and not replaced. Colin Johnson Robb of Ballynahinch, the architect responsible for building the new church, recorded that he discovered the sundial underneath the stairs in the old building and, appreciating its historic significance, had it prominently positioned on the new church. The horizontal sundials made for Bernard Books and Felix Cassedy have not been in place for many years.

The sundials on all four churches feature the Latin phrase “*Memento Mori*” meaning ‘Remember you will die’, which was meant to remind us of our mortality. The dials on Ballyargan and Lissummon also bear the following verse to reinforce this message:

*“Years following years steal something everyday.*

*At last they steal us from ourselves away.*

*This plainly shews to foolish man,*

*That this short life is but a span.”*

The first two lines are taken from a work entitled ‘*Imitations of Horace*’ by Alexander Pope (1688-1744) the eighteenth century English poet. Whether McCreash or his reverend customers chose the quotation is not known. However, the use of the quotation does underline the fact that there was a good standard of literacy among those involved in designing the sundial. The author of the remaining lines is not known. Perhaps it was one of the clergymen or maybe Thomas McCreash himself.

A sundial is very appropriate for use as a ‘*memento mori*’ as it illustrates the passage of time and underlines the fact that our time here is limited.

Each sundial has the latitude carved on it. Acton Parish Church, St Joseph’s and Lissummon and the Felix Cassedy sundials are all marked 54 D(egrees) 12 M(inutes) North. Ballyargan is given as 54D. 14M. North.

The latitude of Acton Parish Church is given as 54D. 17M. North; Lissummon 54D. 14M. North and Ballyargan 54D. 19M. North. While today it is possible to be more precise, McCreash’s figures were quite accurate.

As the six sundials so far discovered span from 1817 to 1834 it seems unlikely that this was Thomas McCreash’s total output during that time and it is hoped that other examples of his work have survived and will be discovered in due course.

Apart from reminding us of our inevitable end, McCreash’s sundials are of little practical value in today’s digital world. However they do serve to remind us of a more leisurely age, add charm and interest to the buildings they adorn and are a lasting testament to Thomas McCreash and to his skill as an accomplished artist.



*Railway Street, Poyntzpass C. 1950*