

# WHAT THE PAPERS SAID

## ABOUT US...

BY JOHN CAMPBELL

We are always interested in finding something by chance when we pick up an old newspaper and in particular when it refers to a person or place that we may know or know about. A significant part of the research that many speakers have carried out in preparing talks for our local history society has involved trawling through newspapers, nowadays usually accessible on microfilm at our libraries or on the internet. Over the years members of the society have brought newspaper cuttings of local events and in the society's library, scrap books contain a wealth of information recording local history. In days gone by, apart from providing the up to date news, newspapers had many other uses. In the days of red tiled kitchen floors some might recall seeing newspapers placed on the floor after it had been washed to assist the drying. So whether you were working in the kitchen or setting the fire your attention might be drawn to something in the paper.

A number of years ago while carrying out some research on the construction of the Newry- Armagh Railway with particular reference to Lissummon Tunnel I visited the Armagh Reference Library. With the assistance of librarian Joe Canning, I spent many hours examining microfilm of the local papers of the time.

One day I came across an article in the Newry Commercial Telegraph by a local reporter who had visited Lissummon Tunnel then under construction. He described in detail the work that was going on there and the difficulties of quarrying through the rock. The full report is contained in an article in Volume 2 of our journal *Before I forget*.

### TUNNEL WILL COST £27,000

On 1<sup>st</sup> July 1861 the *Belfast Newsletter* reported that the engineer on the Newry Armagh Railway had estimated the cost of the line from Goraghowood to Markethill at £92,000. It would cost £27,000 to build Lissummon Tunnel. The engineer was George Willoughby Hemans the son of Felicia Dorothea Hemans the poet of "*The Boy stood on the burning deck*" (Casabianca) fame. The Armagh Line was, of course, the scene of the Sunday excursion disaster on 12<sup>th</sup> June 1889.

In the days of steam engines a reporter travelling from Armagh described the importance of ensuring that the windows were carefully closed when passing through the two tunnels on the line –the other was at Loughgilly -



George W. Hemans

an experience he described as travelling in thick darkness before emerging into the glorious light of day as the train emerged on its way down into Goraghowood.

### SIGNALMAN PRAISED

Prompt action averted tragedy

On 9<sup>th</sup> July 1889, just a month after the Armagh Rail disaster, the *Newsletter* reported an incident on the main line that had echoes of the earlier accidents and could have had similar consequences had it not been for "*the heroic conduct and promptitude of the night signal man at Goraghowood*"

At that time a goods train left Portadown every night at midnight for Dublin and was, as the newspaper described, "*heavily freighted with thirty seven goods wagons*". The report stated that there is an 11 mile steep gradient from McKeown's bridge near Poyntzpass to the Wellington cutting two miles on the south side of Newry. A local man told the reporter that he heard the train coming slowly up the line and seemingly labouring under the heavy load. As it approached his house it came to a standstill.

Thirty three of the wagons became detached from the train and careered down the line. William Dodds the signal man at Goraghowood, alert to the danger, succeeded in shunting the runaway wagons off the main line thus averting a collision with the oncoming mail train which the paper states could have resulted in the loss of many hundred lives.



**Goraghwood Station**



**Cecil Porterfield, Poyntzpass Stationmaster.**

In 2009 Cecil Porterfield who lives in South Harrow in Essex visited his friends Griff and Betty Wylie and Griff brought him to our library to look up some old photographs. Cecil's father William Francis Porterfield was stationmaster at Poyntzpass station for 18 years. On his retirement the *'Ulster Gazette'* printed a tribute to him and made reference to his role in averting a potential disaster on the railway at Poyntzpass station. The report stated that during the war years Poyntzpass was an ammunition supply point with five military camps in the district. Late one night a train came into Poyntzpass loaded with 96 tons of high explosives. Just

after it arrived Mr. Porterfield noticed that the engine had become uncoupled from the wagons which were sitting right in the path of the Dublin Express which was leaving Goraghwood in less than fifteen minutes. The wagons were out of view of the signal man who was unaware of the danger.

Mr Porterfield and two railway men managed to have the engine re-coupled to the wagons which were then moved into a siding with just minutes to spare. One can only imagine the destruction an explosion involving that amount of explosives would have caused to the village.



**Poyntzpass Station**

The railway has played a prominent role in the history of the area but over 100 years before the arrival of the railway, on 4th May 1734, a notice appeared in the *'Dublin Journal'* reporting that "the Trustees of the Tillage Act had given directions to proceed upon the work of a navigable canal between Lough Neagh and Newry"

The notice requested that "diligent and sufficient working men who should present themselves at the Village of Acton on Monday 20<sup>th</sup> May provided with one good working tool such as spade, pick, stubbing axe or a shovel".

If prepared to continue to work until 10<sup>th</sup> August they would be engaged and paid seven pence a day. The canal opened in 1741 and needless to say there are a multitude of stories associated with the events, sometimes tragic, which occurred along the stretch of the canal that runs through the Poyntzpass district. Indeed many linked the canal and the railway. For example on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1851 the paper reported an inquest on a railway labourer working locally on the construction of the Dublin and Belfast Junction Railway between Portadown and Drogheda which opened the following year in 1852. Daniel O'Neill who was residing in Scarva had been drinking in Poyntzpass and left in a state of intoxication. He was believed to have staggered, fallen into the canal and was drowned.

We have learned in recent times of future plans for the Newry Canal and the new recreational uses to which it could be put. On 7<sup>th</sup> May 1949 the then Ministry of Commerce announced the issue of a warrant of abandonment of the Newry Canal and a report in a local paper was titled

**“Last Chapter in the story  
of the Newry Canal draws to an end”**

The report started with this introduction

*“The days when people held barbecues, roasted an ox on the shore of Lough Shark, picnicked on the banks of the Newry Canal and travelled by pleasure boats along the waterway from the Frontier Town to Lough Neagh are now but a memory in the minds of the elderly folk”.*

One unbroken link throughout the canal's history, the newspaper article recorded, was the involvement of the Monaghan family. Joseph Monaghan, interviewed by the reporter, told that he had been employed as superintendent on the canal with fifty years service.



**A working barge on the canal**

Joe's father James Monaghan, grandfather James Monaghan and great grandfather Eiver Cassidy had all worked on the canal. Joseph told the reporter that cargos on the lighters towed along the canal included coal, American grain, Canadian timber, farm produce, implements and general cargo. Mr. Monaghan said he remembered vividly the passenger boats which carried people from Tandragee twice weekly to Newry on markets days.



**Gordon's Lockhouse**

On 5<sup>th</sup> March 1981 the *'Ulster Gazette'* recorded that Mary Waddell had turned the key for the last time in her home at number 9 lock. Mary's father and mother John and Lizzie Waddell had been lockkeepers there and Mary's brother Mickey told many stories about growing up in the lock house. One of those interviewed for *'The Pass Times'* was Peter Campbell, and he told about working at Number 9 lock as a young boy probably just before the outbreak of the first world war.

The lockkeepers then were a brother and sister called Gordon both of whom taught in Jerrettspass School to which they walked every day. He recalled letting 30 boats through the locks in a single day.

The *'Ulster Gazette'* article on Mary Waddell, and Peter Campbell's obituary titled *“the last of the canal men”* which appeared in the same paper, were the work of a local journalist William Morton who is now Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin.

In the earlier story about the runaway railway wagons there was also mention of McKeown's bridge. McKeown's farm, not far from Waddell's lock house, was later occupied by Bobby McDowell. There was at one time a grocery shop there. *'The Newry Telegraph'* of January 1843 reported that on the morning of 23<sup>rd</sup> a person or persons had broken into the shop having wrenched out the sash window. They stole £15 in notes and silver, a significant amount, and also carried away *“seven pounds of tea, six pounds of soap and one pound of cloves!!”*

Another unusual robbery took place at a local shop in Poyntzpass in 1959.

**DARING ROBBERY**

*'The Banbridge Chronicle'* reported that Henry Clarke's shop in Railway Street was the scene of a robbery. Henry woke up to discover that £114 had been stolen from his bedroom. Henry's artificial leg and his clothing had been removed from the bedside and he found them on the stairs. The robbers helped themselves to milk and apple

part before leaving. Henry was convinced that the robber was in the bedroom underneath the bed when he and his wife turned in for the night.

The *'Newry Telegraph'* reported that among the artistes who took part in a concert in Poyntzpass on 14<sup>th</sup> January 1894 was Miss Sarah Quinn who, the newspaper reported, held the people spellbound with her singing of *"Won't you buy my pretty flowers"* and as an encore *"The Ship that ne'er returned"*. Sarah's family retained a copy of the article which described the concert as being held under the auspices of the Local Lighting Committee with the proceeds to defray the expenses of erecting new lamps in Poyntzpass. The article recorded all the artists and their contributions which also included Mr. Byers the well known elocutionist from Dungannon who included in his repertoire *"Paddy Flynn's Dinner at the Big House"* and *"The Tarring of the Cow."* Exactly 100 years later in January 1994 the society re-created, as close as possible, the concert of 1894, again in the same venue, the old Court House, now the Petty Sessions coffee shop.

*'The Portadown Times'* reported the concert under the heading *"Poyntzpass goes back 100 years with the help of modern technology."*

This referred to the fact that, unlike today, the damp and condensation in the largely unused hall had played havoc with the piano and it took the heat of several hair dryers to dry it out before the accompanist Mrs Doreen Whitten was able to get going.

### POYNTZPASS NURSING SOCIETY

Another concert many years earlier in March 1925 was recorded in the local newspapers. It was held under the auspices of Poyntzpass District Nursing Association which the report said was supporting the good and useful work of Miss Best, district nurse, described as *"highly qualified and earnestly devoted to her duties."* The concert was held in the concert hall belonging to Mrs Rafferty of the Central Hotel and among the 250 attending were contingents from Newry to Hollywood, from Markethill to Rathfriland. In charge of the organising committee were Sam English and Joseph Canavan and I quote

*"The chameleon attire of the ladies together with the beautiful decorations lent a charm to the scene which was indeed one of lustrous beauty. Dancing or should I say terpsichorean art commenced at 9 o'clock with an interval for recherché refreshments and continued until 5.00 a.m."*

The minutes of the meetings of the Board of Guardians always provided items of local interest in the newspapers. Guardians were elected by the rate payers to represent electoral divisions made up of town lands. Poyntzpass had two representatives and at one time they were Mr. Peter Quin JP and Mr. William Bennett. They would, for example, regularly receive letters from the dispensary doctor in Poyntzpass Doctor William Robert MacDermott, in a lot of cases about the sanitary conditions in the

village. On 10<sup>th</sup> May 1898 he reported that he had written to Mrs Bennett in Belfast about the sanitary conditions of the houses in Taypot Row in Poyntzpass and he assured the Board that he was confident that she would do all that was necessary. The Bennetts were prominent millers in the village and Taypot Row the mill houses in Meeting Street.



Dr. W.R. MacDermott

### DREADFUL TRAGEDY AT POYNTZPASS MILL

In September 1851 the local paper reported that a little boy named James Patton who was aged 6 was killed when caught in the rollers at John Bennett's scutch mill. The report said the seepage from the sluice had set the water wheel in motion. Another letter from Dr MacDermott, also in 1898, drew the Board's attention to the condition of the embankment at McCourt's dam – he said the breast work was not fit to meet a flooded state of the lake.

On 29<sup>th</sup> August 1889 under the heading

### *"Three persons bitten by a mad dog in Poyntzpass"*

the newspaper recorded that Doctor MacDermott had reported to the Board of Guardians that a young boy named Thomas Shevlin had been attacked and bitten by a mad dog. The doctor advised that the boy was dangerously ill and on hearing his report the Board of Guardians ordered that the boy should be sent at once to Paris for treatment at the Louis Pasteur Institute.

The boy left Newry the same evening on the seven o'clock train for Greenore accompanied by his father and Mr. Wauchope, described as the master of the workhouse. The injuries of the two other people bitten by the dog were not considered serious and after what the paper described as *"an exciting chase"* the dog was shot by Sergeant Maxwell. The institute to which young Shevlin was sent was set up by Louis Pasteur who established it in 1887 and created the first vaccine for the treatment of rabies. He is renowned for the research which led to a break-

through in the treatment and prevention of diseases through vaccination. He of course gives him name to the technique of treating milk to stop bacterial contamination. On 14<sup>th</sup> September 1891 another child in the village, Mary Williams, was reported as having been bitten by a dog supposed to be suffering from rabies and she was also sent off the Pasteur Institute in Paris for treatment. Such was the fear of rabies in the area that there were calls for all dogs to be muzzled. In 1897 legislation was introduced with provisions to prevent the spread of rabies and there have been no reported cases since 1903.

### OPENING OF POYNTZPASS ORANGE HALL

The papers of November 1871 reported a ceremony to celebrate the opening of a new orange hall in Poyntzpass which had recently been built. After the ceremony, the brethren paraded to an adjacent field where they were addressed by Rev. Dr. Bryson and Rev. Hugh Hanna who referred to the present Home Rule agitation.

On 5<sup>th</sup> July 1892 it was the Land Question which was addressed by meetings in Poyntzpass. The report in the paper tells us that Mr Falkner spoke to a unionist crowd in the square whereas Mr. McHugh addressed the nationalists in Rice's Hotel.

When the local history society was formed in 1971 a Mr S.A. Gordon of Glasgow wrote to the 'Ulster Gazette' welcoming this and recalling many hours herding cattle at Poyntzpass fair. He wrote that he remembered a one-armed Michael Davitt making "a speech at the pump" on the Land Question. The rain he said came down in torrents and Davitt commented that "Providence is on the side of the landlords". The name is spelt 'Dowitt' in the newspaper article but reference to the one-armed speaker could confirm that it was indeed Davitt, who lost his arm at the age of 11 working in a cotton mill in Lancashire.

In 1862 a paper reported a meeting of the Deerpark and Poyntzpass Total Abstinence Society which had recently recruited 40 new members who received an inspiring address by a Mr. E.D Atkinson. Unfortunately not everyone got the message and in February 1880 a farmer and his son from the Jerretzpass area were arrested when a police constable discovered a still in full blast in a stable on their farm.

One of the representatives appointed to meet Major Close to ascertain the terms on which he would sell his estate to the tenants was Mr Heber A Magennis. From frequent references to this gentleman in newspaper reports it is obvious that he played an important role in the public affairs of the area. For example a newspaper report about a concert held to raise funds to build a new hall referred to Mr Magennis and give a colourful description of a Newry party's journey to Poyntzpass. I quote "When the white moon was reflected from the white hills of Armagh and Down a party of adventurers heedless of cold and discomfort left the town of Newry and set forth with

*light heart and fast horses to penetrate to the remote and eerie fastness of Poyntzpass"*

They were greeted, the report states, by the uncrowned ruler of Poyntzpass Mr. Heber Magennis.

On 13<sup>th</sup> May 1905 Mr Magennis attended a meeting in the reading rooms Poyntzpass when the subject was Ireland under Home Rule. In proposing a vote of thanks to the speaker he used the opportunity to criticise Horace Plunkett who was a pioneer of agricultural co-operation in Ireland with the aim of improving the lot of small farmers. This was an idea from which, in later years, the credit union movement drew inspiration.

However Plunkett was equally critical of nationalist and unionist politicians who, in his view, cared little for the plight of the people. Mr. Magennis described Mr. Plunkett as a public benefactor but said that he failed to show as much pride in his country.

There have been newspaper reports of assaults and damage to property in parts of the village, Drumsallagh for example, arising out of parades and gatherings.

It is also true that atrocities associated with the recent troubles did not leave us unscathed.

However, as many of the reports of the deaths in the Railway Bar shooting incident pointed out, the community spirit here was strengthened rather than weakened by that dreadful event.

### A HEALTH TO O'CONNELL

A local researcher found a report, from a publication, 'The Star of Brunswick', which tells about an affray in Poyntzpass on Christmas Day 1828.

A party of Roman Catholics and Protestants were drinking together when an individual in the Catholic crowd proposed a toast to the health of O'Connell. This was resented by the Protestants and a quarrel took place resulting in a local man being seriously injured. He died shortly after. There were 5 arrests and at Downpatrick Assizes on 3<sup>rd</sup> of August 1889 another local man was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to 18 months with hard labour.

In 1933 'The Newry Reporter' described a tragic discovery of the body of William McGivern aged 65 in a flax dam in the town land of Corcrum. The paper described a self inflicted throat wound caused by a razor. Mr McGivern's two sons George and Thomas were subsequently arrested and charged with the murder of their father but were later acquitted.

### POST OFFICE CLOSURES AFTER 150 YEARS

On 15 January 2009 'The Newry Reporter' recorded the closure of Jerretzpass Post Office. Gillian Ferris told

the reporter that the post office had been in the Porter family name since 1900.



**Gillian Ferris and Bruce Lockhart**

Two others with local connections figured in the trial of a man tried for murder which was reported in *'The Connaught Journal'* of 1823. Ten years earlier in July 1813 the body of Owen McAdam was taken from the canal near Lisburn. He had been, as the paper said, much bruised and there was blood on his shirt. There was nothing in his pockets but a button mould and a piece of ginger. Witnesses at the trial told about meeting McAdam, the day before the discovery of his body, in the company of a man to whom he appeared to be selling a horse. This man told them his name was McCann and that his father lived in Newtownhamilton. He added that he had worked as a baker in Lisburn. Later a man called James Vance of Cordraine Tandragee told about a man answering McCann's description calling at his house with a horse for sale. The man said his name was McKee and that he lived in County Cavan. The horse had identical markings to the horse the earlier witnesses had seen with McAdam. McCann/McKee left the horse with Vance to sell at Bann fair but never returned. Several witnesses around the Newtownhamilton area gave evidence of knowing the man as Bernard McCann of Newtownhamilton who had served his time as a baker in Castleblaney. When he was identified as the suspect in the McAdam murder searches took place in that area.

The reports do not explain how McCann was eventually found but ten years later the Mayor of Galway arrested a butcher at the meat market in that city who went under the name of James Hughes. Two people who knew the accused as a butcher in Galway and as a respectable married man with a wife and five children were John Lushington Reilly of Scarva who was working at Galway Port as a Collector and Mr. Moore of Drumbanagher.

By the way, Mr. Reilly also served as one of the churchwardens at Galway Cathedral there and as *'The Connaught Journal'* reports under the heading *'Sabbath Breaking'*

*"The disgraceful and shameful practice will in future be prevented in this town and we are extremely happy that John*

*Lushington Reilly has publicly notified his intention of suppressing the evil. And we expect the local authorities will co-operate with him. A few fines imposed and rigorously exacted will accomplish this desirable effect"*

Returning to the murder trial, the arrested man denied he was McCann claiming he was from County Tyrone but both Reilly and Close who visited him in gaol, raised serious doubts about his story. It was proved to the jury's satisfaction that he was McCann and he was found guilty of murder.

On Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> August 1823 he was brought to the scaffold in front of Downpatrick gaol where he addressed the assembled multitude confessing to his crime and knelt in prayer.

What happened next I quote from the paper.

*"He pulled the cap over his face with apparent firmness and self possession and a short time after the fatal drop fell but from his extraordinary weight (he was aged 29 and weighed upwards of 17 stone) the rope broke. The soldiers carried him inside the gaol gate and in a few moments he sat upon his own coffin and asked for a draught of water. An hour and a half later he returned to the scaffold and was launched into eternity."*

Notices in the papers gave details of the funeral arrangements of former residents being conveyed to Poyntzpass by train. On 27<sup>th</sup> November 1882 William Trainor who had lived in Adela Street in Belfast was brought home on the train for interment in Poyntzpass as was a man called Baird.

On 4<sup>th</sup> August 2009 *'The Leader'* newspaper asked *"Is there something in the water in Acton?"* It explained that *'first Rory Best helped Ireland win the Grand Slam and then Niall McVeigh won gold in a men's single badminton competition at a Worlds Games in Belfast'*.

In 1983 *'The Armagh Observer'* reported the first ever ordination in the 192 year history of the Church of St. Joseph when Cardinal O'Fee ordained Michael Rogers to the priesthood. Although born in England Michael came to Poyntzpass when only 6 weeks old. His mother was the former Patricia Anderson from Lisnabrague and he spent a lot of his time in Poyntzpass with his aunt Mrs. Kathleen McHale.



**Father Michael Rogers**

On 4<sup>th</sup> January 2000 *'The Examiner'* reported that a celebration of the dawning of the new Millennium was held on Cnoc na rath in Lissummon.

The celebration included readings from scriptures, poetry, the reciting of the millennium prayer and the rendering of *"Morning has broken"* as the sun appeared over the Mourne at 8.51 am.