

“A MELANCHOLY TRANSACTION”

The Story of a Ploughing Match in the Fourtowns on Monday 16th February, 1835

BY ROY COPELAND



A map showing the location of the ploughing match field

The draconian Penal Laws against Catholicism, initiated by Henry VIII and reinforced by succeeding monarchs, had started to be relaxed in the 1770s. An implicit part of the 1801 Act of Union was a commitment by the British Government to fully enfranchise Catholics but it was not until 1829 that a Bill was put before Parliament and 1834 before it received Royal assent. Under the new election rules Protestant farmers felt doubly disadvantaged; not only could Catholics now sit in Parliament, but another change meant that most of the farmers had been disenfranchised. Hitherto any male tenant holding a lifetime tenancy in a property deemed to have an annual rental value exceeding £2 could vote. The owner of the property registered these ‘*forty-shilling freeholders*’ as voters. Since voting was by a

show of hands at open meetings, tenants were expected to vote for their landowners’ preferred candidate.

However, the Government in London, apprehensive about the prospect of Ireland overwhelmingly electing Catholic candidates who would then fundamentally change the balance of a Westminster Parliament, raised the property threshold for the 1835 election from £2 to £10, removing from the electorate most of Ireland’s tenant farmers. In the County Down district constituency, whereas there was an electorate of 11,664 in 1829, it was only 1,990 in 1835. But the property threshold was not raised from £2 for urban borough constituencies such as Armagh, Downpatrick and Newry.

In the election of January 1835 the Protestant

establishment candidates for Down and Armagh constituencies retained their seats but in the Borough of Newry Sir Thomas Staples was defeated by a staunch supporter of Catholic emancipation.

The strength of feeling generated and the debate among the populace and in the press formed the backdrop to the events of Monday 16th February 1835.

See Donaghmore Townland map on page 25.

On that day the third annual ploughing match of the Donaghmore Farming Society took place. Nineteen ploughmen with their ploughs assembled at 1 pm in a field of James Carswell in Ballymacarattbeg townland. As the weather was fine about three hundred spectators were present, enjoying the day and the whiskey jars being freely passed around. Ploughing was judged to be of an excellent standard and went smoothly until it was noticed that scuffles among spectators were breaking out in several places. These escalated until almost everyone was involved and men were being chased and beaten with sticks. James Carswell became so concerned about damage to his field that he moved everyone off onto the adjacent road as soon as ploughing ended. There disturbances continued awhile until the crowd walked off toward a nearby hostelry.

Thus began a day's events that were to become of such infamy that they were reported in newspapers the length and breadth of Ireland and even in the Westmoreland Gazette in Cumbria.

Ploughing matches

Ploughing matches probably started in England in the 18th Century, as an initiative by large landlords to improve their tenants' standard of tillage and boost crop yields. This was in the aftermath of Joseph Fojambe, around 1730, developing a plough with a mouldboard of timber covered with iron sheet that turned over the furrow and buried plant growth. Fojambe's Rotherham plough, while a big advance in plough design, often needed four horses or oxen and three men for its proper operation. It wasn't good at working wet soil or grass swards. Thus it lacked popularity in Scotland and Ireland.

From the 1760s onward John Small in Berwickshire applied mathematical analysis and science to develop the shape of the mouldboard and share, improving efficiency to the extent ploughing could

be done by one man with a two-horse team. By 1800 the "Scots plough", made entirely of iron and a true precursor of the modern mouldboard plough, was recognised as having value in Irish conditions and ploughing was being promoted as an essential first stage in tilling a crop.

In Ireland the first ploughing match recorded in newspapers occurred at Castleknock, near Dublin, in June 1802.



A Simple wooden-frame plough in common usage before Joseph Fojambe's invention.

Around Poyntzpass the first one may have occurred in 1822, because in 1832 the '*Newry Commercial Telegraph*' reported on the eleventh annual ploughing match of the Drumbanagher and Acton Farming Society. Farming Societies in Glen and Donaghmore started theirs around 1829/30. As in England estate landlords were sponsors and supporters of Farming Societies, thus Arthur Innes of Drumantine House was President of both Glen and Donaghmore F. S. in the 1830s.

Ploughing matches were effective in promoting ploughing; a speaker at the dinner following the 1830 Glen Farming Society ploughing match said that when he came to the district it had only seven ploughs. Now there were over 70. They were also popular social occasions. A newspaper report of the Glen event stated "*there were several thousand persons present... including a numerous attendance of the gentry of the neighbourhood. There appeared also, large groups of handsome young girls of the country, whose smiling countenances bespoke their willingness to partake of the pleasures of the day*".

So when members of the Donaghmore Farming Society took the field on 16th February 1835 they were entitled to expect a day of friendly competition

under the watchful eye of judges and spectators, followed in the evening by a convivial meal at a local hostelry and announcement of the prize winners.

On that Monday evening they gathered at premises run by David Woods, a local businessman. While this location might have been the Four-mile House, certainly owned by David Woods in the 1840s, oral memory of subsequent owners of the plough-match field said it was at Tierney House, a quarter-mile north of the Fivemile hill on the “*Great road from Newry to Banbridge*”, now the A1. In an upper room of the dwelling house members, chaired by Andrew Marshall, Buskill, ate a meal prepared by Mrs Woods then drank toasts to;” *The King, The Queen and Royal Family, The Lord Lieutenant & prosperity to Ireland, Health of Arthur Innes Esq., Society President*”. Each toast was drunk “*with 3 times 3 and great applause*”.

After toasts, as the judges were announcing results, members became aware of an increasing racket in the yard outside and from rooms attached to the end of the dwelling house. These functioned as a pub, with upper and lower loft. It’s impossible to be precise about what happened that evening, since it has to be interpreted through newspaper reports of events and witness statements at subsequent trials and, understandably, conflicting versions were stated. But it seems an argument started over seats in the outside loft, which escalated to the extent that many became involved. Likely that’s when the Farming Society members in the upper room of the dwelling house became aware of the noise and sent a member to investigate. He failed to quiet the disturbance and for his safety had to beat a retreat. Around that stage Sergeant Pearse and five constables from Newry intervened. Apparently Trevor Corry, a Vice-president of the Society, had earlier asked for police to have a presence that evening, perhaps because at the previous year’s dinner police had to be summoned to quell trouble.

Mayhem broke out when the armed police appeared at the door of the large loft and went to enter. They were met with a hail of glasses, jugs, tankards; anything that could be thrown. Men seized Constable Robinson’s carbine pulling him along the loft floor whilst beating him almost senseless with sticks. Constable Shields got the same treatment as he tried to rescue Robinson. Sergeant Pearse’s head was split open. So hard was

he hit, he had to be pulled out and taken to bed in Woods’ house. All this accompanied by shouts of ‘*lay on*’ from the revellers. So the police fired blank cartridges above head-height. When that drew only shouts of ‘*to hell with your powder*’ they fixed bayonets and tried again.

Eventually the police got into the loft and took control, in part because the rioters fled through every possible window and door to get into the yard. One man later recounted that he had been attacked in the loft and escaped with his life only because he fled to a house across the road and hid. In the yard the rioters, about 8 pm, started attacking the dwelling house, breaking all windows, shutters and a considerable amount of furniture. Sometime in this period the police opened fire on the crowd with live ammunition. According to the police, this occurred only after a shot had been fired at them. They killed one man, a Mr Magennis, who police said, had an iron bar in his hand, and wounded several others, including Magennis’ brother.

Rioting was said to continue for an hour and a half before tempers quietened and men made their way home. One group, meeting a Secession clergyman on the way home stoned and beat him, because “*he was a heretic and preached heresy in Newry*”.

Next day, the inquest, before four magistrates that included Trevor Corry, who had asked the police to be present, concluded the police were justified in firing.

Two days later, on Wednesday, the first account of events was published, which started a spat between rival Newry newspapers.

“***Melancholy Transaction***” ran the headline in the ‘*Newry Examiner and Louth Advertiser*’.

“*We regret, exceedingly, to learn that a transaction of a lamentable nature, and attended with fatal consequences, occurred after the dinner of the Donaghmore Farming Society on Monday last. It appears, from what we have been able to gather, that after the ploughing match the members dined together, and spent the evening in the greatest harmony and good humour. It unfortunately happened that a number of persons adjourned from the dining-room to a public house, kept by a man of the name of Woods, where they commenced drinking. In the course of a short period a difference*

of opinion arose among them about the distribution of the prizes; one party asserting that the judges awarded them properly; the other contending that they were unfairly distributed. From words they soon came to blows; and after a good deal of fighting one party succeeded in expelling the other from the house. The victors then commenced breaking the furniture and destroying everything they could lay their hands on. The police soon made their appearance, and after many ineffectual attempts at quelling the disturbance, they were obliged to drive the rioters out of the house at the point of the bayonet. A general attack was afterward made on the police and three of the party were severely wounded by blows from stones; the police then fired, when one man was shot dead, and three others wounded."



North-west view to Poyntzpass from the top of the ploughing match field.

A response appeared two days later, in the 'Newry Telegraph', a paper of Protestant establishment viewpoint.

PARTY SPIRIT

"Atrocious and wanton attack on an agricultural dinner party – one man killed and several desperately wounded. – The painful duty once more devolves on us of recording another melancholy instance of the operation of that baleful spirit of Party-Party, in its vilest and most sanguinary garb – which, originating in sectarian hate, and roused into furious activity by mischievous Agitation, has been so long the plague-spot and the disgrace of our country. As an attempt has been made, in the columns of a Contemporary (inadvertently, it is fair to presume, on the part of the Editor), to give a false and partial colouring to this affair, we have taken more than ordinary pains to arrive at the real facts. These,

therefore as given in the annexed communication, derived by us from an unquestionable source, may be confidently relied on."

'The Telegraph' followed this statement with a letter it had received from Thomas Marshall, Secretary of Donaghmore F. S.

"The Donaghmore Branch of the North East Society held their Ploughing Match on Monday the 16th instant, on Mr James Carswell's farm, in the Four-Towns. Nineteen well-appointed ploughs, with well-harnessed horses, started, about one-o'clock, for the valuable prizes offered by this Society. The day was remarkably fine, and the ploughmen finished their respective plots in capital style. There was a vast number of spectators in the field, who generally conducted themselves pretty well, but evinced a good deal of bad feeling occasionally. After the labours of the day were finished, a large number of members of the Society, and a number of respectable visitors, sat down to an excellent and comfortable dinner, in Mr David Wood's. Mr Andrew Marshall, of Buskill, in the Chair, supported by Mr Norris and Mr McMaster, as Croupiers. After the cloth was removed, the Chairman proposed the health of 'The King' – 'The Queen and Royal Family' – 'The Lord Lieutenant and prosperity to Ireland'. He then gave the 'Health of Arthur Innes, Esq., the worthy and munificent President of the Branch, a speedy recovery and safe return to him.' This toast was drunk with 3 times 3 and great applause. Mr Norris returned thanks. The 'Health of Trevor Smithson and Isaac Corry, Esqrs., the worthy and valuable Vice-Presidents of the Society,' was also drunk with 3 times 3 and great applause. Mr Kerr returned thanks. The Judges, Messrs. John Moody, John Sloane and Robert Urey were then called on for their decision; and, while giving it, it is my painful duty to state, that one of the most wanton, disgraceful and desperate outrages, ever perpetrated in this part of the country, was commenced by a large mob, who, I regret to say, appeared to have been actuated by the most diabolical feelings. They attacked Mr Wood's house about eight o'clock, and continued it with great fury till half-after nine: they completely demolished his windows, sashes, and shutters, and accompanied each volley of stones with frightful shouts and yells. Happily for Mr Woods, and the large and respectable company assembled in his house, Trevor Corry, Esq. had sent six Police to Mr Woods' in the evening, and they were the means,

under Providence, of saving the lives of Mr Woods' family and the company assembled in the house: two of them, Sergeant Pearce and Constable Robinson, were dangerously wounded at the commencement of the attack, and the others, though cut and bruised, continued to defend the house, for at least an hour and a half, with the greatest coolness, forbearance and bravery- firing blank cartridges, and ball occasionally, over the heads of the mob. Meanwhile some members of the Society, who thought they had influence with the infatuated crowd, went amongst them, and endeavoured to persuade them to desist – but were beat and abused by them, and escaped narrowly with their lives. Finding that forbearance only encouraged the mob, the four Police, with some members of the Society, sallied out, and had, in defence of their lives, to fire among them. One man was shot dead on the spot, and it may be expected that a number are wounded. The crowd dispersed immediately afterwards, leaving their dead comrade behind them. It would seem he had been actively engaged in the attack, as there was a bar of iron in his hand as he lay on the ground. The attack appears to have been premeditated as and systematic, as it was reported in the course of the day that Mr. Woods' house would be attacked, and the mob acted in concert and by signal. The previous reports were not credited, the members of the Society placing so much confidence in the good feeling of the people of the country that they could not think them capable of such conduct. Alas! They have been deceived, as from the numbers and disgraceful conduct of the mob is too evident; and those persons who took an active part in the attack have much to answer to God and their country for the bloodshed and damage done by them. I do not know any reasonable cause can be assigned for this outrage, as there cannot be a better conducted or more obliging man in his situation than Mr. Woods; and I would defy anyone to produce, in any part of our County, an equal number of individuals, who have more assiduously at heart the improvement, prosperity and happiness of their country than the members of the Donaghmore Farming Society, or who have been labouring more to accomplish that object; but it appears the Destructives will not, if in their power, permit them to endeavour to do it.

Such Sir, is a correct and true statement of the facts connected with the above melancholy affair, and nothing more. I am yours etc., Thomas Marshall.

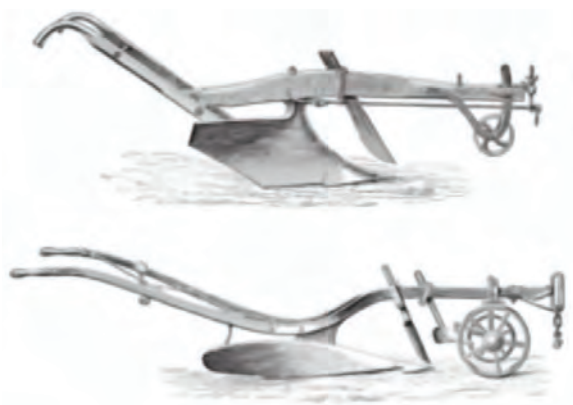


Looking west from the A1 to the site of the 1835 ploughing match field on the skyline.

Below this extensive letter the editor of the 'Newry Telegraph' added;

"From the above statement it is evident, that a "number of persons" did not, as untruly represented to our Contemporary, "adjourn from a dining-room" to a public house, where they commenced "drinking"; neither did "a difference of opinion arise among them about the distribution of the prizes." It is equally untrue, that "from words they soon came to blows," or that, "after a good deal of fighting, one party succeeded in expelling the other from the house." All this, together with what follows "about the victors breaking the furniture" etc., etc., is, we are well warranted in asserting, neither more nor less than a issue of fabrication. It is much to be regretted that our Contemporary suffered himself to be so grossly wrong in this instance; as, in consequence of the paragraph which he has published, and which, we observe, has already been copied into other public Journals, an impression has gone abroad personally injurious to the respectable members of the Donaghmore Branch of the N. E. Society, as well as ruinous to the patriotic object for which alone they have associated. The members of the Society were all seated at the dinner-table, when the acts of outrageous violence were commenced by a desperate and blood-thirsty mob: there could have been no previous difference of opinion about the "distribution of the prizes," because no prize was then distributed, nor had even the adjudication of the Judges been known. In fact, from the legal informations, [from the Coroner's inquest held two days earlier] which we have the opportunity of examining, there cannot be a shadow of doubt that the attack was the result of a systematic and

deliberately-planned scheme, the full extent of which can only at present be conjectured. Early in the day, and during the progress of the "Match," several unoffending individuals- Protestants, be it remembered – were singled out and maltreated by desperate ruffians, encouraged by a numerous faction, of which they appeared to be the leaders, some of which ruffians were, in the evening, among the foremost in assaulting the Police, wrecking the Inn, and attacking the dinner party. One of the Police (the murder of which small party seems to have been the first object of the assailants) was dragged into a room inside the house, and there knocked down, and so brutally abused that his life is considered in danger. Sergeant PEARSE and another of the party, in endeavouring to rescue their companion, were also attacked with murderous weapons, and one of them disarmed of his bayonet; whilst the yells and cries of "murder them out" were as continuous as appalling. Similar treatment, accompanied with similar vociferations, was given to some respectable members of the Society, who, relying on the influence they erroneously supposed they possessed among all parties, imprudently ventured out to expostulate with them. We had almost forgotten to mention, as a remarkable feature in this case, that the attack was commenced, simultaneously, by a proportion of the party which had obtruded itself into the house and the other portion which continued outside. Upon the whole, as eyewitnesses of the affair have told us, the preservation of many lives, is owing, under Heaven, to the unflinching bravery of a small but faithful band of Police, whose propriety of conduct, coolness, and forbearance, under the utmost provocation, is the theme of general admiration.



Two forms of Irish Wheel ploughs with iron mouldboards that turned soil to bury the sod. Likely to be similar to those in the field in 1835.

On Tuesday an inquest was held on the body of the man (whose name is, we believe, Magennis), who was found dead, with an iron bar in his hand! by the Police, after their assailants had dispersed. On this occasion a long and patient investigation was entered into, before the Coroner (Dr. TYRRELL), who was ably assisted by the following Magistrates – N.C. WHYTE, TREVOR CORRY. JAMES LITTLE, Esqrs., and Captain CROFTON. The evidence being, in substance, as above, the verdict of the Jury, composed equally of Protestants and Roman Catholics, was to this effect, that the deceased came to his death by a gunshot; and that the Police were justifiable in firing.

We understand that three or four others of the mob were wounded – one of them, the brother of the deceased, it is said mortally.

All of the Police party have been wounded, two of them dangerously: the others have been seriously cut and bruised with sticks, stones, &c. It is said balls were fired into Woods's house by the mob.

Such are the deplorable circumstances, as far as we can collect, connected with this infamous proceeding. We submit them to the public without further comment, and conclude with repeating, in the words of our intelligent and respected Correspondent, that the assailing party "have much to answer to God and to their country (before whose public tribunals they will be, we hope, shortly arraigned) for the bloodshed and damage done by them."

Of course this attack on the integrity of the 'Newry Examiner' could not be left unanswered. The reply came the following day (Saturday 21st Feb,) when 'The Examiner' published a letter it had received from Thomas Marshall and followed it with the editor's response to the 'Telegraph's' accusations that its report on the Wednesday has been "a tissue of lies".

The Examiner's position was supported by another letter it published the following Wednesday, (25th February).

"Gentlemen, In perusing your paper of Saturday, I find that you have copied, from the Telegraph, the garbled statement of Thomas Marshall of Tullymurray, Secretary to the Donaghmore Farming Society, respecting the unfortunate occurrence at the



Tierney House.

Ploughing Match, on Monday 16th inst. Mr M, of course, commences with stating the number of well-appointed ploughs and the capital style of finish which each ploughman gave to his respective lot. He next proceeds with his narration of the members of the Society, with some respectable visitors, regaling themselves at Mr. Woods' inn, with the names of the worthy Chairman, Croupiers, &c. &c. &c. The toasts consequently follow, with full flowing bumpers, no doubt; the King, the Queen, Lord Lieutenant, President, Vice-Presidents of the Society given with three times three, and thunders of applause. This glowing statement of the hilarity of the convivial party issues from the pen of their Secretary, whilst the earth around him is reeking with the blood of the Slaughtered victims and the mutilated spectators.

Mr. Marshall's "tissue of falsehoods" now commences. He states that Mr. Woods's house was furiously attacked with stones, but evades telling what led to the attack. He omits stating, that six armed Police, with their deadly weapons, (aided by a body of infuriated Orangemen, enter a barn loft attached to David Woods's house, where some altercation took place,) rush in amongst unarmed men, and commence the work of destruction, by knocking down and stabbing every man that came in their way. He says not one word about the volley of musketry from that very barn door, and window, among an unsuspecting crowd, when one man lost his life and several were dangerously wounded. He

said a large mob attacked Mr. Woods' house: but he has not the candour to acknowledge that not a stone was thrown, nor an angry glance given at Mr. Woods' house, until the work of blood was complete. He states that a bar of iron was got in the deceased man's hand. This is a falsehood – a gross and palpable lie. The iron was found on the road, and brought and laid at the dead man's side, on a wad of straw. He further states, the "attack was premeditated and systematic." No doubt it may have been so, with a certain party; and perhaps he is in the secret, as the party assailed and massacred were not so highly favoured as to receive guns and ammunition from a certain quarter, during the preceding week. This Secretary Marshall (or Martial) says not a word about the Policemen firing on the people, without command from either a Magistrate or chief. He mentions not the wailings and bemoaning of a distracted mother, coming in the dead of night, (after the lamentable news had reached her), and laying herself down on the wad of straw beside her butchered son, until morning. Not a word about the misery of an afflicted father, weeping over the corpse of his lamented son. Oh no, this would be delicate food for such a palate. This very Thomas Marshall speaks highly of the members of the Donaghmore Farming Society. No doubt there are honourable and good men amongst them; but Mr. Marshall does know, or should know, that there are respectable farmers not 7 miles from

Donaghmore Church that would not enrol themselves amongst them. This Mr. Marshall should also know, that if the Police had been kept in their barracks, at Newry, on that day, one drop of blood would not have been shed; nor the country thrown into distraction.

Gentlemen, in the words of this vaunting Secretary, I will conclude these painful remarks: "That those persons who took part in this wanton butchery, have much to answer God and their country, for the bloodshed and damage done by them"

*I am, Gentlemen, your very obedient servant,
A DONAGHMORE FARMER."*

Nine or ten men were arrested at the time of the riot. At the end of March, two ringleaders, James Hanratty and Patrick Carroll, were put on trial at Downpatrick assizes. While all agreed there was fighting in the field and again in the evening, naturally witnesses differed about responsibility for the evening riot. Prosecution alleged the police had to intervene because of the severity of fighting in the loft. The sergeant was knocked unconscious by a thrown beer barrel, two constables dragged into the loft had their weapons taken and used to threaten the rest of the policemen. When firing

blanks did not stop the rioters from attacking Mr Woods' house the police were forced to use live ammunition.

Defence witnesses said it was a heavy-handed intervention by police to quell what was only a minor disturbance about seating in the crowded loft that soured the mood of the revellers and forced them to take defensive action.

The prosecuting barrister in Downpatrick courthouse was none other than Sir Thomas Staples, the beaten candidate in the Newry Borough constituency. The jury recorded guilty verdicts and Judge Pennefather, passing sentence, said that even if the police had committed an error and overstepped the mark it did not justify the "*lawless determination and conduct of the prisoners making such an unwarranted attack on them*". Police were peace-officers and they not only had a right, but it was their imperative duty to interfere when a riot took place. James Hanratty got 21 months jail, Peter Carroll six months.

A further 11 men went on trial in August charged with aggravated assault. Ten were convicted and each received 9 months jail. One was found not-guilty because he provided credible evidence that he was at home at the time of the riot.

SOME WORDS WE USED TO USE

Taken at random from Seamus Murphy's very extensive collection.

Boys-a-boys: (boys-a –dear) an exclamation of surprise at some unexpected news.

Bunking: mitching or playing truant from school.

Clashbag: A tell-tale, a gossip or busybody.

Che-che: words used repeatedly used to call or passify a cow.

Fanked: twisted, tangled or entwined – as an animal's tether.

French fiddle: a mouth-organ or harmonica.

Gilt: a young sow

Geg; a joke or a person who jokes – a 'quare geg'.

Goosegabs: gooseberries.

Heartsome: pleasantly agreeable, uplifting.

Jemmy Rafferty: 'The common Jemmy Rafferty' the common sensible man.

Kitter: left-handed

Moiley or Polly: a cow with no horns

Oxter: the armpit 'put something under your oxter'.

Pancrocked: exhausted, tired-out, fatigued.

Pismire: an ant.

Quid: a one-pound note.

Rook: a compulsive hard-working person out to make a lot of money.

Scaldy: a person with very close-cropped hair.

Scitter: a cheeky youngster; an impudent brat of a child.

At half-mast: said of a person whose trousers are too short for him.

Skift: a slight passing shower.

Skew-whiff: off the level, not straight.

Sparable: a type of tack or small nail used by shoemakers.

Spey: foretell; one who could spey fortunes could foretell the future

Tanner: an old sixpence

Twig: catch on, understand what's happening, get the message

Wallflower: A girl who wasn't asked to dance.

Yelti-yorn: the yellowhammer.