

THE FAMINE AND THE WHYTE ESTATE, LOUGHBRICKLAND

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The Whyte Family Home

The Whytes first arrived in Ireland with Strongbow and at least one of the family marched north with John de Courcy in 1177. They were one of the very few Catholic landlords to retain their land during the Penal Law period when 90% of landowners were dispossessed.

To understand their connection with Loughbrickland and Aghaderg, we turn to Sir Marmaduke Whitechurch who was contracted 'to clothe' Elizabeth 1st's army in Ireland and having satisfactorily completed this task, was rewarded in 1585 by being granted considerable lands in the Loughbrickland area. He was a native of Staffordshire and to support him, he brought settlers from his native home, built a strong house in Coolnacran townland (in most early correspondence, the spelling is 'Colenacran') and a parish church, and established fairs and markets. In the following years, through astute dealing, he acquired further lands elsewhere in Counties Down, Armagh and Monaghan.

Sir Marmaduke married Mary Puleston and on his

death in 1634, their only child, a daughter, Frances, inherited the Loughbrickland estate. Frances married Trevor, Viscount Dungannon and their daughter Rose married Nicholas Purcell, Baron Loughmoe of Tipperary. When Mary Purcell, their daughter, married John Whyte of Leixlip Castle in 1704 the Whytes became owners of the Loughbrickland estate.

John Whyte's father had been a supporter of King James and following the defeat of the Jacobites at the Boyne, he had lost all his lands. John Whyte, a Catholic landowner, somehow managed to recover his land by around 1700. He sold his Leixlip land and settled in Loughbrickland. The estate, mostly located in Seapatrik Parish, consisted of around 2,500 acres in the townlands of Ballydown, Ballyeivy, Tullyconnaught, Tullyear, Coolnacran, Dooghary, Drumnagally, Ballykeel and Loughbrickland village.

How did the Whytes hold onto their estate when their co-religionists were losing everything?

Part of the answer may lie in their friendship with the Hill, or Downshire, family. There is evidence of mutually beneficial land deals and elaborate trusteeships. Furthermore, the family's record of military service throughout the 18th century was clear proof of their loyalty to the Crown. During the Napoleonic Wars alone, six members of the family died in the services.



John Whyte: 1752-1814

John Whyte's son John (1714-1784) built Colenacran House, while his son, also **John (1752 – 1814)** took the Oath of Allegiance under the Catholic Relief Act of 1793 which qualified the Whytes as Catholic landowners. In 1814, John's second son **Nicholas Charles (1784 – 1844)**, a naval officer, succeeded him. The end of the Napoleonic Wars closed all hopes of promotion for Nicholas and like many others he was reduced to half-pay. A little disgruntled, he returned to Loughbrickland to run the estate.

Nicholas Charles did play a small part in the struggle for Catholic Emancipation (1829). He became a Magistrate and the first Catholic to hold the office of High Sherriff of County Down. During

his time Loughbrickland Catholic Church was built on a prime site in the heart of the village and the Whytes contributed £400 towards its cost. In 1841, Nicholas received the promotion he craved and returned to Plymouth as a Naval Commander. The Whytes became absentee landlords and Colenacran House, which had been extended at considerable cost in the preceding years, was leased to a branch of the Reilly family from Scarva.

In the years between 1780 and 1845 the population in Ireland had more than doubled to over eight million. Everywhere there was an alarming dependency on the potato, perhaps 90% in the south and west and between 20 to 30% in the north of the country. While the potato was a nutritious crop, its failure in the past had resulted in localised famines, and the variety 'Lumper' which had become most common was particularly susceptible to blight. German traveller Johann Kohl wrote of Ireland in the 1840s *"Nowhere else do we find human beings gnawing, from years' end to years' end, at the same root, berry or weed. There are animals who do so but human beings nowhere except in Ireland. No mode of life in Europe could seem pitiable after you have seen Ireland!"* He continued *"The bulk of the population live in wretched hovels scantily covered in straw, surrounded and almost entombed in mire, each adult consuming up to 14lbs of potatoes a day."*

Visitors to the area in the 1830s painted a very positive picture of wealth and prosperity. The Upper Bann, described by Sir Robert Kane as *"the most fully economised river in Ireland"* supported some eighteen mills on a six-mile stretch between the Corbet and Lawrencetown. Dunbar and Smyth's mills both employed close to two thousand outweavers and exported vast quantities of linen. The linen-lords' fine houses dotted the countryside and the market town of Banbridge flourished. Fine buildings were erected such as The Market House, Holy Trinity Church, two splendid Unitarian Churches, St' Patrick's Church, and 'The Cut' was created. The Workhouse, built for eight hundred and opened in 1841, rarely had more than two hundred and fifty inmates.

The Ordnance Survey Memoir for 1830 includes the following comment on the area *“the richly cultivated fields, studded with comfortable cottages, the snowy appearance of the bleach greens and the noisy manufactories with the growing villages around them and the noise of the busy shuttle may be heard nearly everywhere.”* Surely the famine could not have an impact here!

In 1827 Nicholas Whyte evicted four tenants, Robert Anderson, Hugh Henry, Charles Monaghan and Francis McDonnell. Side-by-side with the prosperity of the linen trade, there was misery and distress. Begging within the parish of Aghaderg became so widespread that badges were issued which allowed only certain people to beg.

Other factors also contributed to the unfolding tragedy. Market prices for agricultural produce had fallen at the end of the Napoleonic Wars but landlords had not reduced rents. The linen and cotton industries were suffering a severe depression and jobs and wages were further undermined by the spread of mechanisation. The failure of the potato crop could not have happened at a worse time.



Nicholas Charles Whyte: 1784-1844

In his evidence before the Devon Commission of 1845, Charles Magee, the Whyte Estate Agent was

voicing concerns. He warned of trade being bad, of falling prices, the population increase and the difficulties in collecting rents. Correspondence between Nicholas Charles and the family solicitor, Thomas Crozier, reveals growing tensions about the family's extravagance and resulting financial difficulties. Indeed in one letter Crozier urges Nicholas to come home from Plymouth and to stop wasting money.

Nicholas died at Plymouth on 4th January 1844 and ownership of the estate passed to his son, 19 year old **John Joseph (1826 – 1915)** who remained in Plymouth.

Nicholas's widow Mary, together with Thomas Crozier and Charles Magee, battled to resolve the inherited debt.

Blight first struck in the autumn of 1845 and the crop failure was partial but in 1846 it was total, followed by the cruel winter of 'Black '47', after which too few potatoes were set. In 1848 the failure was again countrywide.

The consequences were unimaginable. Michael Buerk described the famine in Ethiopia as *“the closest thing to hell on earth”*. In Ethiopia fatalities were one in thirty, in Ireland, one in eight. In Ireland in those terrible years typhus, dysentery, cholera, scurvy and smallpox stalked the land and many were *“left unburied in ditches and houses and scores left to the mercy of the dogs who have nothing else.”*

The part played by landlords and their agents is a very mixed story. Many were ruthless, brutal and selfish like Lucan – John Charles Bingham, Lord Lucan of Ballinrobe, Co. Mayo (of *‘Charge of the Light Brigade’*), one of the most notorious landlords in Connacht, being responsible for the eviction of 2,000 unfortunates. He was known as *‘The Exterminator’*. Others however made sterling efforts to help their tenants and supported local relief committees generously. The Leslie's of Glaslough, Co. Monaghan, for example were among the most humane and generous landowners. During the famine they organised relief works and it is their

proud claim that not a single person was ever evicted on their estate.

In October 1845 a letter from Charles Magee to Mrs. Whyte contains the alarming statement “*the potato crop is very much injured.*” No one could have imagined what was to follow. In 1845 there were 222 tenants on the estate. Two thirds of these holdings were of less than five acres. There were as well numerous cottiers and landless labourers living in single-room cabins, dependent on the conacre system. In times of particular shortage these were often the first victims. Many of the tenants were in arrears of rent and in 1845 the arrears amounted to £462, almost 20% of what the agent would have expected to collect annually.

The Banbridge Workhouse minutes clearly demonstrate the growing crisis and the desperation of many. By January 1847 the Workhouse was full and during that savage winter, to increase accommodation, sheds and galleries were erected and 400 boys were housed in the old brewery building on the Castlewellan Road. Hundreds were turned away and on occasions the constabulary were called to disperse those seeking entry even though “*they exhibited symptoms of starvation and even of death.*” Numbers were to reach 1464 and in one week in February there were twenty six deaths. Burials in the grounds were discontinued. Fatalities in nearby Lurgan workhouse were second only to those in Skibbereen, Co. Cork.



Banbridge Hospital on the site of the former workhouse

In a letter dated 23rd February 1847 Reverend Francis Clements, Church of Ireland Rector of

Tartaraghan, Co. Armagh, wrote to the Society of Friends describing the conditions of people in his parish:

“Weaving is the only means of employment. There are no private or public works carrying on or about to be carried on in the district. Even this means of employment is rapidly ceasing. I have witnessed the living lying on straw by the side of the unburied dead, who had died three days before. Many cases from actual starvation have occurred among the able-bodied, without reckoning the aged and infirm, who have been cut off by the effects of starvation, or the many, many unnumbered children who have died from the same cause. I have been called to see a girl of four years old, a few weeks ago a strong, healthy girl, who was so emaciated as to be unable to stand or move a limb.”

Conditions here are rapidly approaching the situation in the county of Cork.”

Local relief committees were set up in both Banbridge and Loughbrickland. Loughbrickland’s Committee included representatives of all the churches; landlord John Temple Reilly of Scarva - who had rented Colenacran House - acted as Chairman, Robert Quin Alexander, Reilly’s brother-in-law, who had moved to Acton House, Co. Armagh, was Secretary; also William Fivey, agents and other prominent people. The committee raised the very creditable sum of £685-11-2 to provide meal or soup for the starving and when it was dissolved in May 1847, Robert Q. Alexander received a glowing letter of gratitude from his fellow members for his generosity and selflessness “*his property not lying in this neighbourhood.*” In his reply, Alexander pointed out that between December 1846 and May 1847, the Committee had assisted 2,542 people in the Parish of Aghaderg. He thanked his fellow committee members for their “*zealous cooperation*” and stressed that he had done no more than “*the duty of every Christian.*”

Government financed soup kitchens were introduced in May 1847 and almost 800 were fed daily in Loughbrickland until the scheme came to

an end in August that year.

On the Whyte Estate, financial difficulties grew as tenants fell into greater arrears, and Charles Magee, under suspicion of dishonesty, was replaced by J.P.Kelly. By May 1848 rent arrears were almost £1,100 and the dreaded word 'evicted', which in some parts of Ireland was a virtual sentence of death, begins to appear on the rental record. An 'Agriculturalist', P.O'Connor, was employed by John Whyte to inspect the estate and advise Kelly.

There is an extraordinarily aggressive letter from the Parish Priest of Aghaderg, Father John Doran, to J.J. Whyte on 21st. December 1848. The priest, who had been accused of owing three and a half years' rent - £35 - in turn accused John Whyte of failing to keep his father's promise of free rent. He writes that *"the house, an old rickety one ready to tumble.....the people who lived in it were about to leave it, never to have successors, except such as were in the house called the 'Ark', wherein all the filth and wretchedness of the surrounding country too refuge when driven from their miserable cabins. How much rent do you get from houses in Loughbrickland at present? How many have become roofless since you were here? Ask your agent these questions, or any person acquainted with your property. I seek nothing from you in this transaction but what I should demand from any Orange landlord in the County."*

On 7th March 1849 P.O'Connor, the agriculturalist, reported to J.P.Kelly :*"...To be candid, things are very near as bad as some twelve months ago in the West of Ireland and were it not for the manufactories along the Bann they would be in the same level with the people of that district. The people are very industrious and persevering, generally speaking. Whoever said before the Land Commission that if the system of ejecting followed in other parts was put into operation in Down that it would become a Tipperary was no false prophet. I plainly foresee it..... These ejectments and house levelings are the talk of the whole country and I declare I feel myself placed in a very unenviable position, stranger as I am amongst them."*

Eviction Scene

I now proceed to give you a list from each townland of those who I should say are not capable of holding their farm long.....if the land was given without rent or tithes to three fourths of them they could not make it produce what would support their family through the year. The importance of the local linen industry cannot be overstated but falling wages resulted in much hardship and distress."

A week later, Kelly forwarded O'Connor's letter and list to John Whyte advising him *"not to 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.....but it must be done as quietly and as cautiously as possible."*

He went on to promise to give out seeds and help tenants to purchase manure and he advises John Whyte to *"deal liberally with Father Doran."*



Workhouse Memorial on the site of the old workhouse

The estate rental records seem to confirm the picture painted by Father Doran, O'Connor and Kelly. Arrears of rent reach a startling £1,652 in May 1849 and in the years between 1847 and 1851 over fifty per cent of the smallholders were threatened at one time or another with eviction. At least half of these were carried out and Thomas Crozier, the family solicitor, received almost £200 in fees. Some money was also spent on a range of improvements such as sub-soiling, fencing and thatching.

By 1850 the great famine was over but the Whytes,

like many others, were still struggling to improve the management of their estate. This provoked considerable hostility amongst the tenantry and for a brief period the Tenant Right movement seemed to unite Protestant and Catholic smallholders in Ulster. Indeed at a great Tenant Right meeting outside the Downshire Hotel in Banbridge on 28th January 1850, Reverend John Doran and two local Presbyterian ministers, Reverend Dobbin and Reverend Rutherford, were amongst the principal speakers.

Reverend Doran in his address declared *"We have in this neighbourhood some of the worst landlords in Ireland."* He went on to say *"I would rather see thirty two bodies of Orangemen with flags, fifes and drums, and one or two green banners among them than any other sight."* He then urged his listeners to challenge the landlords.

However in his letters to John Whyte and Kelly, Reverend Doran adopted a different tone. On 7th January, two weeks before the Tenant Right meeting, he wrote to Kelly saying that he was *"greatly obliged for your personal kindness"* and urged him to *"cautious in pressing ejectments"*. He warned him against *"the Russells"* and expressed his fear that there was a Catholic at the head of the movement. (It is not clear who exactly *'the Russells'* he referred to were but there appears to be a suggestion of some sectarian undertones at the time.)

In other letters he stated that the Whyte estate was not as badly off as others and that the level of rent reductions was only bettered by those on the Sharman Crawford estate. (William Sharman Crawford of Crawfordsburn was a radical and progressive landlord who championed tenant rights – known as the 'Ulster Custom' – which gave the tenant greater security and greater compensation for improvements made to his holding etc. Sharman Crawford attempted to have the 'Ulster Custom' enshrined in law and extended to the whole of Ireland.) Father Doran described Kelly as the best agent in Ireland, intelligent, painstaking and conciliatory and told John J. Whyte that arrears are the only issue and that the *"storm is not directed against you....but against the great landlords."*

However, he did warn him not to come to Loughbrickland at that time. *"You are a Catholic, combinations will be got up against you! Do not press claims against bad tenants just now."*

Reverend Doran's more conciliatory approach seemed to have borne fruit for, when the estate's November rentals were drawn up, his £60 arrears had disappeared!

On Tuesday 15th January 1850 a report in *'The Banner of Ulster'* under the heading *'Reduction of Rents'* states that *"John Joseph Whyte Esq. In addition to his former concessions to his tenantry at Banbridge, has authorised his estimable agent Mr. Kelly, to allow 20% reduction on all arrears due on his estate and 20% on all rents over 35 shillings per acre."*

Despite the efforts of John Whyte, Kelly and O'Connor, the debt could not be cleared, so in 1855 the townlands of Ballydown and Drumnagally had to be sold under the Encumbered Estates Act to clear the debt.



John Joseph and his family c. 1886.

John Joseph Whyte, as a nineteen year old, inherited an estate heavily in debt on the eve of the great famine. There can be no doubt that there was great hardship and suffering on the estate between 1845 and 1850 and mistakes were certainly made. The Whytes were neither Lucans nor Leslies but somewhere in between.