

Banbridge before the Famine

By David Griffin

By 1830 Banbridge was long established as a major centre of the linen industry. In fact Sir Robert Kane, 1784 described the Upper Bann as,

“the most fully economised river in Ireland”

Along the Bann between Corbet, Newtown and Tullylish there were eighteen mills engaged in the various processes of the linen trade. Indeed the mill-owners combined in 1836 to form the Bann Reservoir Company and build the reservoirs at Lough Island Reavy and Corbet to power the mills on the river. The industry continued to expand and in 1837 a quarter-million pieces of cloth a year were being woven in the Banbridge area. 2. The Ordinance Survey memoir for Seapatrick Parish (1837) describes

“the richly cultivated fields studded with comfortable cottages, the snowy appearance of the bleachgreens and noisy manufactories with the growing villages around them and the noise of the busy shuttle which may be heard in nearly every house.”

However the wealth of the linen trade did not bring prosperity to the whole community. The nature of the industry changed following the introduction of the wet spinning process (By James Kay of Preston in 1825) and the weavers become increasingly dependent on the mill-owners. Women spinning in the home could earn little more than 1d a day and the bleachers imported vast quantities of mill-spun yard which they ‘put out’ to the weavers. In Banbridge Brice Smyth of Brookfield employed 2,000 outweavers and Hugh Dunbar of Huntly a further 1,700.

As the Rev. James Davis, Unitarian Minister, Seapatrick Parish comments in the 1837 “Inquiry into the condition of the of the Poorer Classes in Ireland” the changing stucture of the industry brought great hardship to the weavers and very considerable wealth to their employers.

“The great majority of small farmers, some years ago, were in the habit of connecting the weaving of linen with the management of their little farms; and regarding their farms merely as places of accommodation, they looked to the profits of their trade to enable them to pay their rents and all other demands. At the time

of which I speak 19-20ths of the tradesmen were able to weave on their own account, and all the profit on the webs wrought came to themselves. For some years past 19-20ths of them weave to extensive manufacturers, who are not able to weave for themselves and the wages are so low that in general it requires close, constant and hard work, to clear from 7/- to 8/- or 9/- in the week, and in doing so it requires a great part of another person’s time in the family to attend them; many of them fall considerably short of these sums, if the yarn happen to be bad or if they be not exceedingly diligent. At the same time I believe the manufacturers pay them as high wages as the state of the market will afford but their earnings by the loom no longer enable them to pay high rents, high tithes and high cesses and the farm seldom does more than increase their difficulties. Thus whilst the operative tradesman in the linen business is getting exceedingly poor, a few manufacturers are monopolizing the trade and are getting exceedingly rich. For if they have but a shilling of clear profit on every web woven to them their yearly gain will be very considerable; so that whilst they are most eminently useful in giving employment to thousands and thousands, the principal benefit settles with themselves; and whilst there may be as much money in the country as there was 16 or 20 years ago, it is far from being so equally divided among the community: the operatives in the linen trade are becoming more and more dependent, the money is leaving the hands of this useful class of men and is accumulating to an immense extent in the hands of their employers.”

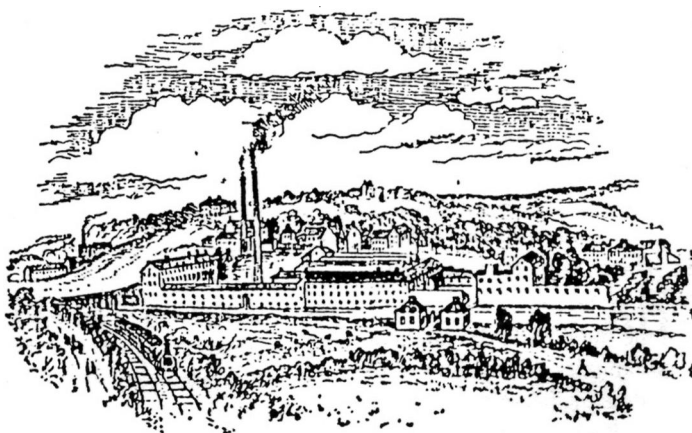
Banbridge developed quite dramatically in the 1830s and this no doubt was largely due to the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the mill-owners. The Marquis of Downshire also contributed to many of the developments. Indeed few of the town’s familiar landmarks predate the 1830s, although the Downshire Arms and Iveagh House are two exceptions.



"The Cut" with the old town hall on the right.



Unitarian Church, Downshire Road.



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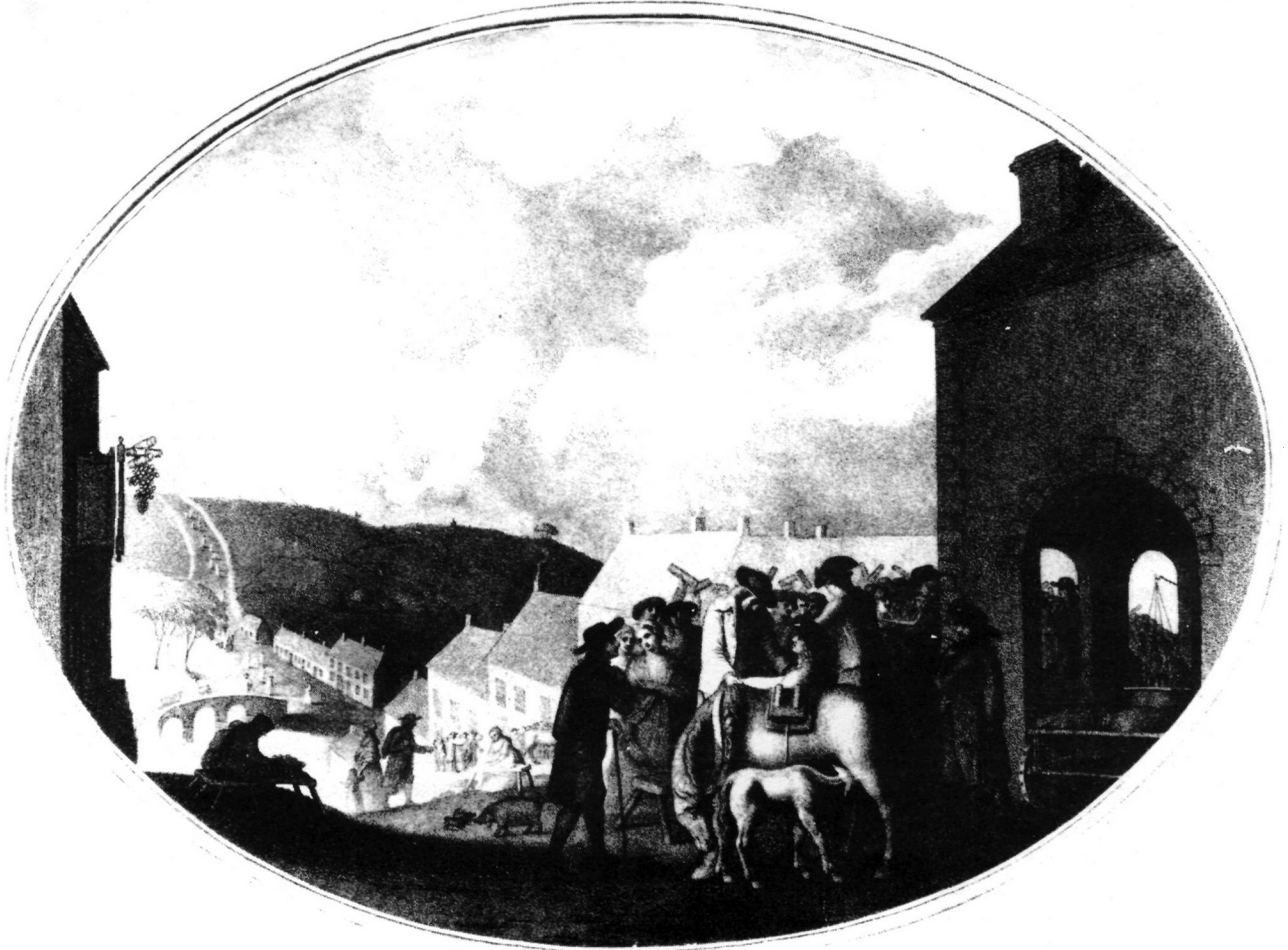
At this time there were many complaints about the severity of the climb through Banbridge and the possibility of by-passing the town was seriously discussed. Faced with such a threat, the Marquis of Downshire, local mill-owners and merchants, combined to employ William Dargan (Ireland's greatest railway engineer) to build a new stone bridge across the river. However the greatest engineering feat of the period was the building of the 'Cut'. The old linen hall which had dominated the town was taken down and the hill lowered. The original 'Cut' was 200 yards in length and a mere 15ft wide and cost £19,000 (It was widened in the 1880s).

There was much debate about the siting of a new Market House and it was eventually built on the site of the 'Bunch of Grapes'. The Market House, which cost £2,000, became the centre of a flourishing and varied trade. Three banks were also opened in the

1830s. The Market House also housed the Petty Sessions and a Reading and News Room. At the back of the Market House stocks were provided that "*will answer occasionally for culprits*"³.

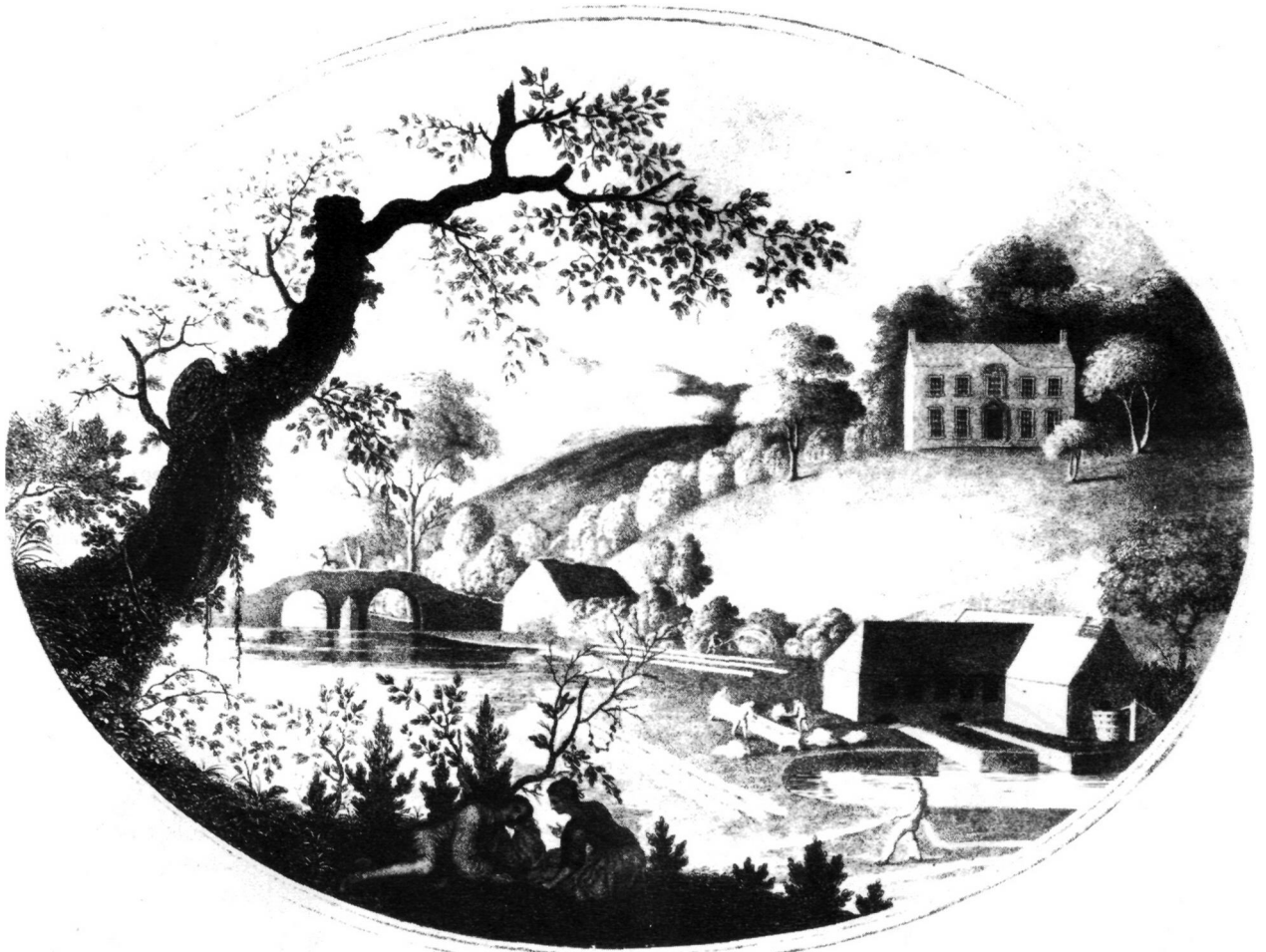
The wealth of the town in the 1830s is perhaps best shown by examining the flurry of church building. The split between Unitarianism and Presbyterianism resulted in the building of Scarva Street Church in 1830. Indeed the Unitarian Meeting House on the Lurgan Road could no longer provide for the thriving congregation and the splendid church on the Downshire Road was completed in 1845. In 1837 Holy Trinity Parish Church opened its doors, as St. Patrick's Church (Seapatrick) was too small and too far away. Work on St. Patrick's, Dromore Street was in progress and a Wesleyan Church was also built.

However, there is another side to the picture. While the mill-owners and merchants lived in their fine



The Brown Linen Market at Banbridge in the County of Downe. The Weavers holding up their

Pieces of Linen to View, the Bleachers elevated on Forms examining its Quality.



Perspective View of a Bleach Green taken in the County of Downe. Shewing the methods of Wet

and Dry Bleaching, and the outside View of a Bleach Mill on the most approved construction.

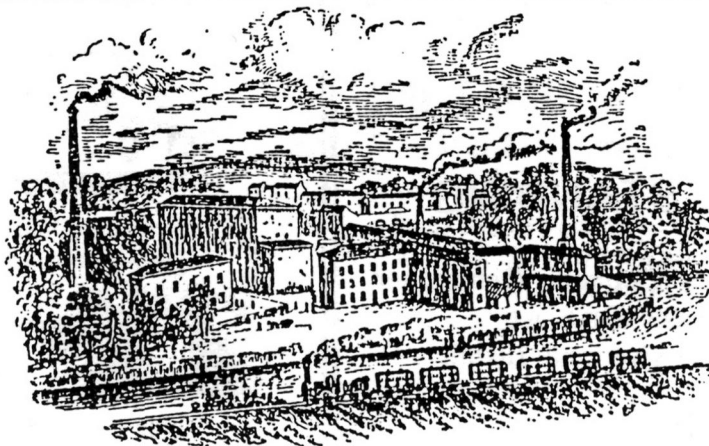
houses, many of which were scattered along the Bann, the poor classes lived in single roomed cabins.

“The cottages are in general from 15 to 18 feet long and from 10 to 12 wide and are composed of stones and mud rudely put together.” 4.

The provision for the poor was totally inadequate. There were one hundred and thirty registered beggars but many others were forced to resort to the town's three pawnbrokers at regular intervals. A single dispensary provided for the medical needs of the poor as the County Infirmary at Downpatrick was too far away and the Fever Hospital in Tandragee had few beds. A major development in 1841 was the opening of Banbridge

Workhouse (on the site of the modern hospital) and Banbridge became the centre of the newly formed Poor Law Union. The Workhouse which was built to house 800 was to play a vital role when famine struck in the later 1840s.

1. Paper by John Smyth, British Association, 1784
2. O.S.M. Seapatrick Parish.
3. P.R.O. D671/0/14/3/2.
4. Appendix to First Report of the Commissioners for inquiring into the condition of the Poor Classes in Ireland. Upper Iveagh.



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