

# Fairs and Markets - Selling Livestock

By DAVID WRIGHT

## INTRODUCTION

JOHN LENNON, in his excellent presentation on Fairs in Ireland, began with his personal memories of Poyntzpass monthly fair. He then took us back through the history of fairs in Ireland to the great Aonachs and festivals of pre-Christian times. In this article I want to look at fairs and markets in more recent times and at their importance in selling livestock and farm produce.

## IMPORTANCE OF THE LIVESTOCK INDUSTRY

We should never forget the contribution that livestock has made and continues to make to the wealth of this island. Livestock, especially cattle and sheep turn our greatest natural asset, grass, into a saleable commodity.

Equally, the role of Fairs and Markets as the means of bringing together on a more equal footing farmers and dealers to turn the livestock into money and to provide the food for people, not only in Ireland but in GB and much further afield. Ireland always was a major livestock exporting country, even during the famine years of the 1840's.

## FAIRS AND MARKETS

A brief word on the difference between Fairs and Markets. As John Lennon explained Fairs have their origins in festivals, tribal gatherings and great gatherings of people, from annual as in the Lammas Fair down to monthly local village fairs, and where trading was only part of the activities of the fair.

Fairs like the 'Lammas' or 'Puck Fair' continue as great social events. Others are reviving such as the 'Dromore Horse Fair' and hiring fairs are a thing of the fairly recent past. It is said that "every fair is a market, but every market is not a fair". From their earliest times fairs had an important law making role and provided a place for trading and exchange of title to ownership in a more orderly fashion.

Markets on the other hand were more clearly set up for the purpose of orderly trading, often on a commodity basis, e.g., butter, eggs, livestock, etc.

It appears as though the grants of land between the 12th and 17th century gave the opportunity to establish markets and fairs. But it was not until the reign of James I that the Letters Patent granted the right to hold fairs and markets on certain days, with the right of levying tolls and conducting the court of "Pie Poudre" at which disputes arising from the running of the market were settled.

## MARKET RIGHTS

Market rights carried the responsibility to maintain order and to protect the rights, property and ownership of those who came to buy and sell. The owner of the market rights was responsible for ensuring that all and sundry could come to the market and buy and sell, without let or hindrance. Market rights also gave a monopoly and therefore had a financial value. They controlled the right to set up a market in a particular location and gave an opportunity to protect trade from competition. Logan in his book on the "Story of Irish Fairs and Markets" describes how landowners, landlords and town commissioners exercised their right to set up markets in opposition to each other and how they established specialist markets such as for linen or butter etc. to bring business and industry to their towns. The layout of many towns, with their squares, diamonds and market houses, many now gone and others now restored to their former glory, as in Newtownards or Antrim, owe much to the existence of market rights and the desire to use them to develop trade.



On the way to the Fair.

Markets were also held on a regular and more frequent basis, e.g., Newry pork market every Thursday, in order to facilitate trade.

Unlike fairs which were held on the street or on a fair green, markets often moved onto more purpose built sites and under cover.

## MARKET TOLLS AND OTHER CHARGES

Tolls, rents for space for stalls and trading booths were an important source of revenue in markets. The need to standardise and control weights and measures also became an important part of the organisation and regulation of the market. Providing facilities for weighing and an independent and accurate weight became an important function and source of revenue to the owner of the market rights.

Concern over the rights to hold markets and fairs and problems over existence, content and ownership of rights appears to have occupied much Government time since early in the 19th century.

Market tolls became a contentious issue leading to the setting up of a Select Committee of the House of Commons in 1826 to consider the tolls levied. Not much appears to have been done until widespread resistance to the payment of tolls "eventually resulted in tolls being abolished, by mob force, in a great number of market towns in the provinces of Leinster, Ulster and part of Munster", to quote the report of the Fairs and Markets Commission of 1853.

## THE ABOLITION OF TOLLS

Although tolls were no longer charged in many markets in Ireland from 1853 onwards, they were offset by greater charges on other services such as weighing. The Commissioners of 1853 reported that "The worst markets we visited were those where toll had been abolished by violence and opposition, and there was, in consequence, no proper accommodation and an absence of efficient supervision and control". Farmers were no better off and discontent continued.

Harkness in his report to the Ministry of Agriculture in 1932 records that in the Report of the Fairs and Markets' Commission, Ireland of 1853 it was found that markets were held in 349 towns and villages in Ireland. In 125 of these no patent could be found authorising the holding of markets. In the case of 103 markets they were held on different days from those mentioned in the grant authorising the market, Fairs were held at 1297 different places in Ireland. No patents could be found for 485 and 324 were held on different days to those referred to on the patent. Some markets, such as in Belfast and Londonderry, were authorised by Act of Parliament.

## EVIDENCE GIVEN TO THE ROYAL COMMISSION 1888

The reports of Charles W. Black together with the minutes of evidence taken in 1888 for a Royal Commission on Market Rights and Tolls give a valuable insight into the situation in markets in Ulster at that time. In a 20 day period between the 2nd and 21st of June, 1888, he visited and took evidence in Ballymena, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Limavady, Londonderry, Lisburn, Armagh, Portadown, Lurgan, Newry, Banbridge, Dromore, Downpatrick and Ballynahinch.

His report on Armagh illustrate how a Market Committee was prepared to raise and invest money to improve the market facilities and benefit business. He reports that the Toll Committee represented holders of debentures issued to buy the market rights many years previously. They had provided very considerable facilities and benefitted the public. He refers to their failure to observe a trust deed requirement to put the toll money into a sinking fund to "extinguish the debenture debt" but noted that they had a good



Poyntzpass Fair c. 1930.

investment, paying them 6% interest and therefore "not in any great hurry to see the debt discharged".

In Portadown the markets were established by the Town Commissioners and were "very commodious and appear to give great satisfaction, but a portion of the market business is still conducted upon the streets, and the feeling on the part of some parties is that it should continue to be so conducted".

The situation at Newry pleased him well. He reports "the markets seem to give great satisfaction, and certainly the accommodation is very superior. The market places are a little scattered, but not, I apprehend, so much so as to cause inconvenience. The authorities record statistics more thoroughly there than in any other town in which I have sat, and can compare the quantity of produce with that brought in 10 years ago, etc. The portage or 'house money' on pork is charged there, and evidence was given that when the market authorities advised the farmers to resist the deduction the buyers refused to purchase the pork, and the Market Committee had to buy up the pigs brought to market that day, and re-sell at a loss".

Some points from the minutes of the Newry evidence taken on the 16th June, 1888 :—Markets vested in the Town Commissioners under the Newry Improvement and Water Act 1871.

#### Principal markets—

Needham Street :  
 Needham Street West :  
 Buttercrane Quay :  
 Mary Street South :  
 Mary Street North :  
 Abbey Yard :  
 Market Street :

cereals, grass-seed and pork.

live pigs and sheep.

butter and flax.

potatoes, vegetables, fish poultry.

hay, buttermilk, tools, implements, etc.

Hiring market.

Print and lump butter, eggs and retail.

"Thursday is the main market day, but there is a market for almost all commodities on Tuesday and Saturday. Fairs for the sale of cattle, sheep, pigs and other livestock are held on the first Monday of each month in the Needham Street markets. No market business is permitted on the public streets".

The evidence gives detail of how the markets were acquired from the Trustees of the Earl of Kilmorey and the £15,000 for the purchase of land and construction of facilities raised from the Church of England Insurance Institution.

There is great detail on the toll rates and finances, with the comment about declining trade and some years ago of having made a profit but only £500.



Cattle being marked at the end of the deal.

The impression is given in the detail of the evidence that Newry markets were well managed.

On the other hand, the detail given at the Banbridge hearing two days later records a lot of dissatisfaction from farmers over toll and other charges, lack of facilities and bad feelings with shopkeepers and provision merchants over competition.

In Banbridge he found that the Town Commissioners had "incurred considerable odium among the farmers through enclosing with considerable railings the market square". He also, "must stigmatize as fraud by buyers upon the sellers the practice of deducting the odd half pence for the pounds weight over the quarter for pork, oats or grass-seed, illustrating how a farmer would lose from 6d. to 1s. per carcase upon his pork".

#### THE MARKETING OF NORTHERN IRELAND PRODUCE REPORT 1932

Marketing problems continued to be an issue and in 1932 Harkness submitted his report to the Ministry of Agriculture on some enquiries into the conditions of marketing certain classes of agricultural produce in Northern Ireland.

He records that ownership of markets was passing to local authorities and out of the control of the original grantees or owners.

A detailed study of the toll and weighing charge situation for 50 markets in Northern Ireland was carried out and he reports that, in Keady, for example, we have the worst situation with tolls charged on oats, flax, potatoes, grass-seed, pork, young pigs and other produce, although there were no market facilities provided beyond the public street.



Meeting Street on Poyntzpass Fair Day.

Yet in Tandragee and Markethill no tolls were charged.

Reference is made to the purchase by the Urban District Council, in 1908, of the market right to charge tolls in Keady for a sum of £2,000. "The imposition of tolls appears quite unjustified by any other consideration than the desire to obtain revenue in relief of the rates of the town".

No tolls were charged at 11 markets under the control of Market Committees and where there was no direct connection with any local authority. What emerges is that these Market Committees aimed to build up the markets and bring business and trade to the smaller town or village. Local authorities, on the other hand, appeared to have the policy of deriving as much revenue as possible from their market rights, at least in the short term. Farmers and market traders were seen as a threat to shopkeepers rather than a means of bringing trade to the town.

At that time, in 1932, there were 50 centres of recognised markets in Northern Ireland. In Co. Armagh and Co. Down the Urban District Council owned the markets in Armagh, Keady, Lurgan, Portadown, Tandragee, Banbridge, Bangor, Dromore, Newry and Newtownards. A Market Committee owned Crossmaglen, Markethill and Castlewellan and no one seemed to know who owned Kilkeel.

There were also 88 centres with livestock fairs in Northern Ireland, but only in seven did there appear to be any authority in control of the fair.

### SELLING CATTLE

Selling cattle, whether it be dropped calves, stores, fat cattle or cows was always a major event on the farm. After the weather, prices and the

state of the market were the main talking point, and still are. Rightly so, as this represented one of the more difficult and bigger money transactions for most farmers in their farming year.

My earliest recollections are of the thrill and fear of driving cattle from Ballyreagh to Poyntzpass and herding them down the street to the Station. Bullocks tied by the neck in the byre during the winter and fed on turnips and meal were not easily stopped when they were let out at daylight on a March morning to walk to the Pass for grading. A big stick, fast on your feet and quick thinking as to which gap or hole in the hedge to "kep" was the order of the day. Also, that you kept yours well clear of any other cattle so that they didn't get mixed, at least until you were at the bottom of Loughlin's hills and the cattle had settled down and were a bit slower and more biddable. Then the long wait as you moved down the street from the pump, hoping that the lot in front and behind were quiet and stayed together and that you could find a bit of a wall to hold them in against while you waited.

Poyntzpass was an official buying centre during the control days up to 1954 when the Ministry of Agriculture bought all the fatstock and meat was rationed.

Cattle were graded and weighed on the GNR weighbridge behind the Signal box. Top grades were Superplus down through A plus to C minus and rejects, which you hoped wouldn't happen as there was the loss of value and the problem of taking the beast home again.

Graded cattle were held in the pens along the railway siding for loading into wagons for shipping to Belfast, or possibly to the boat for England.

There was not much dealing on the "grading

days" as the bulk of the cattle were sold to the Ministry and the price was fixed by the grade and weight.

### THE PASS FAIR

The Saturday fair was a different matter as farmers held out for more money and the dealers drove a hard bargain. Those were the days when the men in the yellow boots, good suits, splattered with dung in spite of their brown coats, and equipped with cane sticks, protected with black insulating tape, were important to lesser mortals like us. The roll of white fivers impressed us and some farmers!

Harkness, in his 1932 report, gives a very good account of the persons other than farmers directly involved in the marketing of cattle.

**Shippers** who in their own words were born and brought up in the cattle trade and can sometimes trace back several generations. They shipped to both customers and markets across the water, maybe with one of the family over there looking after the selling, while they did the buying. He identified 82 shippers who operated in Northern Ireland and shipped over a quarter of a million cattle in 1930. They were regarded as the most able of the buyers, men of sound judgement, and of substance. Harkness calculated at that time they would need to have at least £1,000 working capital.

**Dealers** bought cattle on farms and in fairs, supplied shippers and put cattle into the only main saleyards of that time in the North, the Belfast saleyards of Allams, Robsons and Colgans. They also supplied cows and stores to farmers, sometimes retaining a financial interest in the cattle.

In spite of the image often painted of the dealer as a sharp operator and short on honesty, they had to be highly professional in order to survive and be successful. They needed a good eye for stock, and for people, and had to be men who were highly intelligent and whose word was their bond.

They had to be, and often in their later years claimed to be, graduates of the University of Life!

**Tanglers** and **Blockers** also had a role to play in dealing, although generally disliked by sellers and to the extent farmers stayed away from some fairs and markets to avoid them.

Their role is well described by Logan. The tangler as the man who brought the reluctant farmer and the dealer together to close the deal, sometimes buying himself in order to do so. Logan describes the tangler as "usually a man of high intelligence, quick-witted, a good actor and an expert judge of stock".

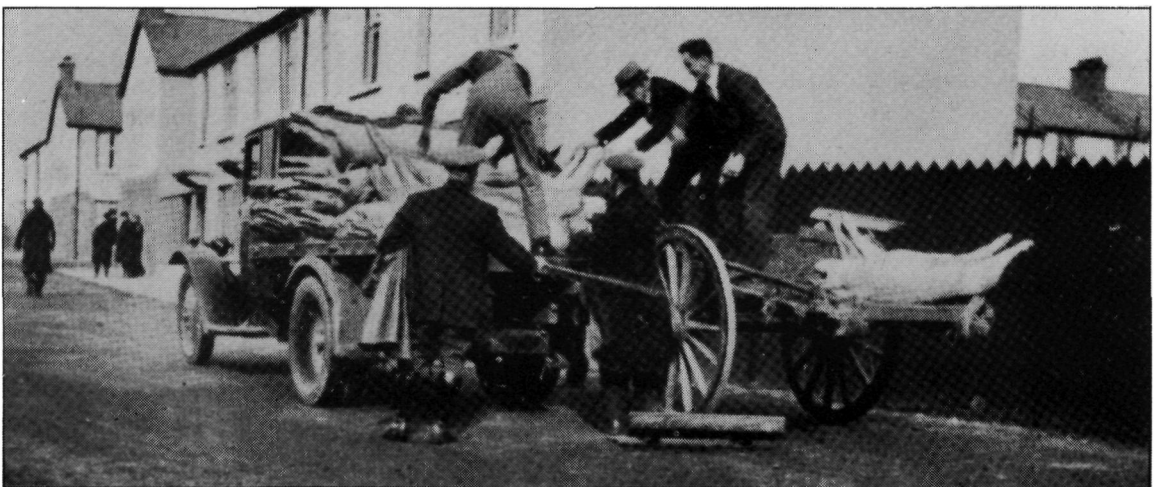
**Blockers** usually started dealing with a farmer, often on the road into the fair, in order to block a deal, keeping out a legitimate dealer until a dealer came along and was prepared to give him a few shillings to get in on the cattle. Harkness refers to them as "ne'er do wells", well known and disliked by farmers, like the "guinea hunter" of to-day.

Sam Hanna Bell in his description of "Traveling to the Fair" writes as follows: "The bargainer and the 'tangler', it has been said, are the only men who go to a cattle fair without cattle and come away from it with money in their pockets.

"I can heartily commend a cattle deal to a young actor who wishes to extend his range of mime and expression; for there he can observe, more rapidly than I can write them down, stunned awe, amused tolerance, inexhaustible patience, simulated deafness, magnanimity, inarticulate fury, moving appeals to Providence and a frightening rigor of hands buried in pockets or hidden under coat tails".

**Drovers** were also in attendance at fairs and markets at a time when lorries and tractors were rare. Suck pigs and fowl were the only stock to normally travel by horse drawn cart, cattle and sheep either walked or travelled by train or boat.

Good drovers were invaluable and many successful men in the livestock and meat business



Loading pig carcasses onto the buyer's lorry.

A 8698

Talbot Street,

BELFAST,

TELEPHONE: BELFAST 27121.  
GRAMS: "RETURN, BELFAST"

1.4.1958

**THOMAS FORDE & Co., Limited,**

Bought from S. Wright

Per A.

Ballyroy

Poyntzpass

**6 PIGS.**

IDENTIFICATION NUMBER	WEIGHT		CLASS	GRADE	PRICE PER CWT	£	s.	d.
	CWTS.	QNS. LBS.						
855	1	2 21	4	A				
566	1	2 24	4	A				
852	1	2 25	4	A				
851	1	1 14	2	1				
854	1	3 0	4	A				
	8	1 0			70/6	29	9	10
853	1	1 12	1	1	67/6	4	11	7
	9	2 12						

Less Inspection, etc., and Pigs Board Levy }  
@ 1/4 per pig: ✓

8396

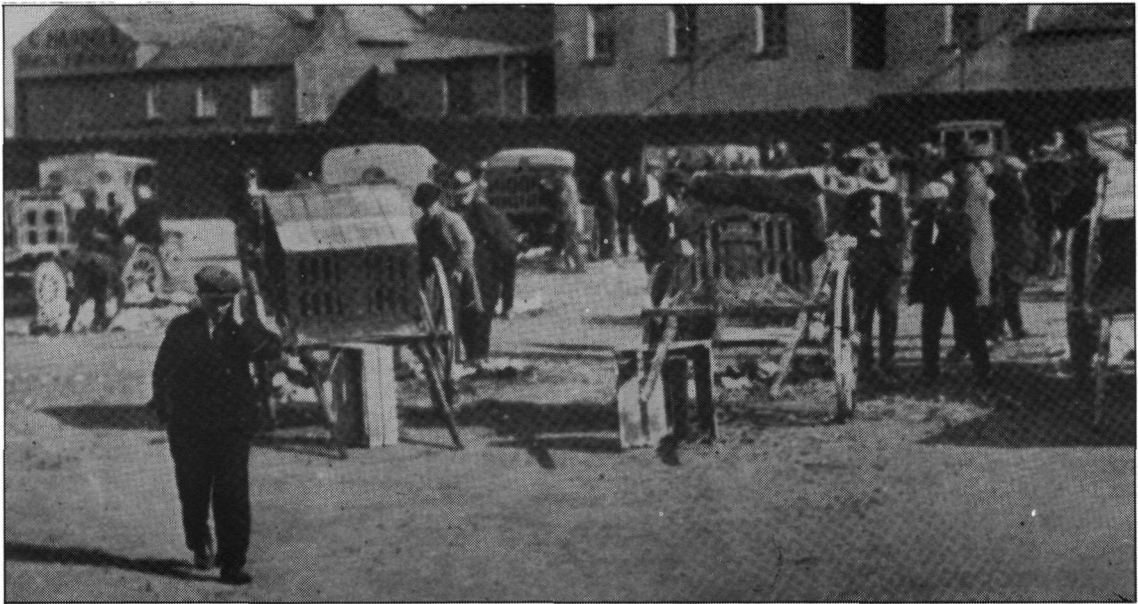
Inclides 3/ =

Nett Total

34	1	5
	8	=
£	33	13 5
		3 0
£	33	16 5

Invoice: (Thomas Forde & Co. Ltd.)  
Giving details of farm-killed pigs 1938.





General view of a Fowl Market.

to-day started off as drovers. They could take full charge of the stock from the moment the dealer dealt. They included experts who knew and applied all the scissor marked identity codes, acted as shipping agents and could travel the length and breadth of Ireland.

They were paid, either in a lump sum or by the head and eventually reached the stage of having their own closed shop drovers union in the Belfast markets and at the docks.

#### **SHEEP**

Although sheep numbers increased rapidly after the First World War, by the 1930's they were still

only about one-third of to-day's record, whereas cattle and pigs were about half.

Most of the selling was of stock coming off the mountains and fat lambs from lowland farms. Auction sales, and direct sales off farms to dealers and butchers tended to be more common than for cattle. There were big sales in Hilltown and Rathfriland and dealers who specialised in sheep also supplied the Belfast markets. The coastal holiday trade was also a good outlet each summer.

Poyntzpass and Newry was the base for a number of highly regarded shippers and dealers who specialised almost exclusively in sheep.



Loading fowl purchased at the market.

## PORK

Fat pigs were killed on the farm and slaughtering at bacon factories commenced in the 1930's with the setting up of the Pigs Marketing Board to overcome the weaknesses of the pork markets.

The farmer arranged with the "pig killer" to kill his pigs, usually the day before the local pork market (on a Thursday in Newry).

Agents of the bacon curers attended the market and, after inspecting the carcasses on the cart, offered a price. If a sale was agreed, the curer's ticket was tied to the carcass and marked with the price agreed, usually with a weight limit proviso.

Agreeing to accept the top price of the market or the curer's top price for the day usually meant that the farmer didn't know exactly how much he was getting before agreeing to sell.

He then had to have each carcass unloaded for weighing on the market scales. It was also inspected for blemishes, usually by a pig tester employed by the market or town council. Price cuts for overweight and blemishes were applied which often led to a discontented farmer.

The carcasses were then taken to the curer's premises, sometimes by the farmer himself or by rail or lorry.

Market tolls, weighing charges, portorage, insurance and a variety of other charges, including the usual luckpenny, all had to be deducted before the money was paid over after the sale, usually in the local pub.

There was considerable dissatisfaction among farmers over the charging practices in the different markets. Also about collusion between curers over price fixing. Having killed his pig, the farmer was in a very weak position to bargain for a better deal, especially if pork was plentiful.

Considerable dissatisfaction with the system and the unsuitability of the farm-killed pig for the Wiltshire rather than the traditional dry salt cure eventually led to legislation for a statutory marketing board, the PMB, and compulsory purchase of pigs. Pork markets and farm-killed pigs were on the way out, with no regrets by many pig keepers.



A Sheep Fair—little demand.



This Copy to be handed or sent to the Producer or the Person acting on his behalf and to be retained by the Producer for reference.

**CERTIFICATE A.**

Serial No. **E 72844**

THIS FORM IS TO BE USED ONLY WHEN THE CERTIFYING OFFICER IS (a) IN A POSITION TO CERTIFY THAT THE SALE OF THE ANIMAL OR ANIMALS HAS TAKEN PLACE, AND (b) CAN GIVE ALL THE NECESSARY PARTICULARS OF THE ANIMAL OR ANIMALS.

Cattle Industry (Emergency Provisions) Acts, 1934 to 1936.

**PARTICULARS OF ANIMAL(S) CERTIFIED**  
(Note.—A separate line must be used for each animal.)

(Quote this Number in any communication regarding this Certificate)

Certification Centre.....  
*Poyntzpass.*

I HEREBY CERTIFY that  
*Four* steer(s).  
*One* heifer(s).  
*One* cow heifer(s).

Insert IN WORDS the number of each class and strike out words not applicable.

particulars of which are given opposite, has/have this day been presented to the Certifying Authority under the above-mentioned Acts at the above-mentioned Certification Centre by or on behalf of:—

Name in full.....  
*MR SAMUEL WRIGHT*  
Full Postal Address.....  
*BALLYKEAGH*  
*POYNTZPASS*  
*CO ARMAGH*

State whether Mr., Mrs. or Miss, and please write in BLOCK Capitals.

who is a producer of cattle within the meaning of the Acts, that the Certifying Authority have examined the animal(s) and found it/them to be (an) animal(s) in respect of which the producer is eligible to receive payment in accordance with the provisions of the Acts; that the said animal(s) has/have been marked in accordance with the arrangements referred to in Section 2 of the Act of 1934; that the said animal(s) has/have been sold by the above-mentioned producer on the ..... day of ..... 1937 and that the weight(s) of the said animal(s) is/are as stated.

Dated this *6<sup>th</sup>* day of *March* 1937.  
Signed.....  
*A. McConville*  
Certifying Officer.

\* Note on Weight.

The weight of each animal specified in this certificate is the actual weight of the animal to the nearest quarter of a hundredweight. For the purpose of computing the amount of the payment to be made to the producer under the Cattle Industry (Emergency Provisions) Acts, 1934 to 1936, a deduction of 28 lb. from the actual weight in respect of each animal will be made by the Cattle Committee.

Animal's Identification Number (if any)	Colour of Animal.	Class and Weight (see Note *).				Price realised on Sale. £ s. d.
		Steer. Cwt. Qr.	Heifer. Cwt. Qr.	Cow Heifer. Cwt. Qr.		
(1)	<i>Red</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>8 2</i>			
(2)	<i>Roan</i>				<i>33/6</i>	
(3)	<i>Red &amp; white</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>1</i>		<i>40/0</i>	
(4)	<i>D.</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>2</i>			
(5)	<i>Roan</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>3</i>			
(6)						
(7)						
(8)						
(9)						
(10)						
(11)						
(12)						
Totals ... ..		<i>37</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>2</i>	



Young pigs offered for sale.



Fair Day in Poyntzpass c. 1906.