

# Gates and Gatemakers

by DYMUNA MURPHY

**H**OW LONG gates have been in existence I don't know but iron has been used continuously in Ireland since around 300 BC. When it was first used in gatemaking is difficult to determine. Fields and gates only came into vogue in Ireland from the beginning of the nineteenth century.

In his book, *Irish Heritage*, Professor Estyn Evans notes: "Writers of Irish travels before the last century frequently comment on the absence of gates, for which in fact there was very little need so long as the 'rundale' system (open field cultivation) of farming persisted ..... Sampson, writing of Co. Derry in 1814, states that gates were almost unknown except near towns, and that a common substitute was a hay rope strung with thorns — an interesting rustic forerunner of the hated barbed-wire".

In an article in 'Ulster Folklife', (Vol. 2 1956) Professor Evans again writes; "One of the reasons for the adaption of strong piers and gates at field entrances was to check cattle lifting. A Discourse of Ireland in the 'Calendar of State Papers' (1601-1603) recommends the erection of 'a strong pair of boarded gates with an iron bar across the midst' at the entrance to fields. By the nineteenth century the gates themselves had come to be made of iron, and of course this is the Irish fashion.



A "harr-hung" gate

Wakefield, writing in 1812, tells us that 'when Gentlemen erect gates, they are of iron, hung upon stone pillars'. He adds that wooden gates were almost unknown and that in any case they would have been stolen for use as fuel."

Again in 'Ulster Folklife', (Vol. 2 1956) but by another writer, Caoimhin O'Danachair:—"In his account of his travels in Ireland in 1776—1778, Arthur Young notes a few instances of improving landlords erecting iron gates on their own demense lands. At Headfort, near Kells, Co. Meath, he noted that 'All Lord Bective's gates are iron, which cost him £5-5s., and as wooden ones come to £3-3s., he finds them the greatest improvement, saving the expense very soon' ..... Twenty-five years later on, another observer says that 'Except on the demenses of noblemen and gentlemen, the gates are generally composed of wood, and can be had from, half-a-guinea to a-guinea-and-a-half according to the quantity of the timber used in forming them' .....

"At the same time the shortage of timber with the relative fragility and the risk of loss made wooden gates unpopular despite their comparative cheapness ..... The general passing of land ownership from landlord to tenant in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought about the erection of more and more in all but the poorest areas .....

"Finely wrought iron gates were the blacksmith's pride. He delighted in good craftsmanship and usually added some simple scrollwork or ornamentation. Frequently for materials he used the discarded iron tyres of the country carts, grown too thin for continued use on wheels but still stout enough for gate iron ..... Iron gates were almost invariably harr-hung, the lower end of the inner member set in a stone socket at the foot of the pier, the upper end held by an iron eye set in masonry, or, sometimes, in a perforated stone projecting from the pier near the top .....

"Wooden gates, it has been shown are comparatively rare, although with the passing of

the gate-making blacksmith, they are more frequently seen now than formerly. Most recently erected gates however are factory made of welded strip or tubular iron, and these increase in number daily since the older gates are often too narrow to allow free passage for modern large farm machinery and tractors."

While the ancient Celts had their famous 'smiths' the first record of a blacksmith in our area in "modern" times I have been able to find, occurs in an article by Colin Johnston Robb which appeared in "The Irish News." Entitled

"The Fourtowns Insurgent" it contains the following: "William Shanks was a 'shopboy' in Newry in the 1790's. While there he joined the United Irish Society (United Irishmen) and when he returned to his native district "The Fourtowns", between Poyntzpass and Loughbrickland he set up his own group of United Irishmen — "The Fourtowns Boys". The pikes for this group were made by Kerr the local blacksmith ....."

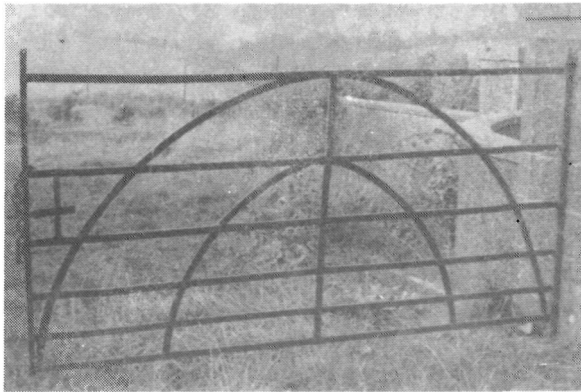
The following is a list of some of the blacksmiths who have worked in this area in the last 200 years:

BLACKSMITH	FORGE SITES	DATES
Kerr	Fourtowns	C. 1798
Turley	Taniokey	C. 1840
Jack Davidson	Corcrum	1860-1870
Hugh Conlan	Acton	C. 1864
Edward Carr	Markethill Road, Poyntzpass	C. 1864
Gambles	Crack Bridge, Canal Bank	?
Bernard Conlan	Church Street, Poyntzpass	1860
{ John McSherry	Church Street, Poyntzpass	? 1900
{ (Son-in-law)		
{ Patrick McSherry	Church Street, Poyntzpass	1920-1970's
{ (Son of John)		
{ Bob Loughlin	Jerretzpass (later Poyntzpass)	1870's
{ Robert Loughlin	William Street, Poyntzpass	1910's
{ (Son of Bob)		
{ Edmund Loughlin	William Street, Poyntzpass	1920-1970's
{ (Son of Bob)		
Andy McParland	Scarva (Lived Acton)	1870's
Black	Acton	(After H. Conlan)
Collins	Acton	(?) 1880's
Wilson	Drumbanagher	1870's
McConnell	Lissummon	(?) 1880's-1890's
Billy Graham	Tyrone's Ditches	1908-1940/50
(pronounced Grimes)		
Flanagan	Drumbanagher	(After Wilson)
John Clarke	Eleven Lane Ends	1900-1940's
Ned Murtagh	Lissummon	1900-1940's
Johnny Rice	Clare	1910-1920's
Jemmy Trainor	Fourtowns	1920's
Joe Lutton	Loughgilly	1920's
Jemmy Mooney	Tyrone's Ditches	1940-1950's
John Brown	Eleven Lane Ends	1940-1960's

Tommy John Flanagan (Father at Drumbanagher) Wilson	Ballyargan  Lissummon/Lesh Road (Later Dispensary)	1930-1940's  1890's
Christopher McLean	Loughbrickland	1900's

## JACK DAVIDSON

Bill Fisher claims that Jack Davidson was the only blacksmith in his area at one time. His smithy and home were in Corcrum, although a William Davidson is mentioned in the Griffiths Valuation of Tenements, 1864, in the townland of Demoan. From local sources (Miss M. Savage, Mr. B. Fisher and Mr. J. McIlroy), it is known that Jack Davidson lived at the Tullynacross/Demoan crossroads in a meadow called 'Davidson's garden' or sometimes 'the smoothing iron.' The latter name is possibly due to it's triangular shape and being surrounded by roads on all sides.



A typical Davidson gate

For Davidson to make gates and farm implements the client had to supply his own iron. This was usually obtained from Redmond's (now Fisher's), in Newry. Most of the gates were nine feet across and about four feet high but they were usually made to the farmer's specifications. Some gates were smaller, about eight feet across, making it difficult for farm vehicles to pass through.

The "horse-shoe" type of gate around Bill Fisher's farm were made by Jack Davidson. Quite a few gates of this design still exist around the locality, on the Loughbrickland Road, the Canal Bank, the Old Road and the Tandragee

Road. Whether these are all Davidson's or a design adapted by other blacksmiths in this area, because they were fashionable for a time, is difficult to prove. None of the gates has a name or trademark of a blacksmith readily identifiable on them. The gates on Bill Fisher's farm date back to the 1860's/1870's.

At Fisher's old home the garden gate made by Jack Davidson has a special hinge. It is so designed as to make removal difficult. The last



Fisher's Garden Gate

bar goes through the eye and is joined unto a round bar going down (third bar from end) to the lower end of the gate. This is held in place by a bolt which has to be released before the gate can be removed. There is rather a nice latch on this gate.

It is said that Jack Davidson's sister, Agnes, 'struck' for him. He was supposed to be a 'delicate' fellow, while Agnes was described as 'a strong rather muscular lady'. Miss M. Savage recalls a story told by her father of how one day a very angry farmer came into the forge. The farmer was complaining about being overcharged for a job that Jack had done for him. He took his jacket off and went up to Jack telling him he'd teach him a lesson. Agnes happened to be there

and stepped in between them saying to the farmer, "Don't touch my brother, I'm the one that strikes around here, any striking to be done I'll do it". With that the farmer took himself off.

It is not known when Jack Davidson died.

### HUGH CONLAN

Joe Monaghan's house in Acton was the site of Hugh Conlan's forge. His name is mentioned in Griffith's Valuation of Tenements 1864. A man called Black had the forge after him. The gardens at the back of the house are still referred to as 'Black's gardens'.

### TURLEY

This blacksmith was Pat Turley's (Acton) great grandfather, but Pat cannot remember his Christian name. The forge was near Tanikey School but there is no trace of it today. The family originally came from the Sheepbridge area. Pat remembers his grandfather telling him that during the famine or shortly after it, "he walked to the 'Pass with his father (Pat's great-grandfather) to the 'soup kitchen' set up in the village square beside the pump". From this it would appear the forge was in operation around the 1840's and 1850's.

### GAMBLES

Opinion is divided as to whether Gambles had a forge at Gamble's Bridge (the Crack Bridge) which is at the junction of the Canal Bank and the Dromantine Road. One local source says he remembers three small houses and the nearest to the Newry road was the forge. The horses were shod at the gable-end of the house. They had a stone for shoeing carts and it is supposed to be still there.

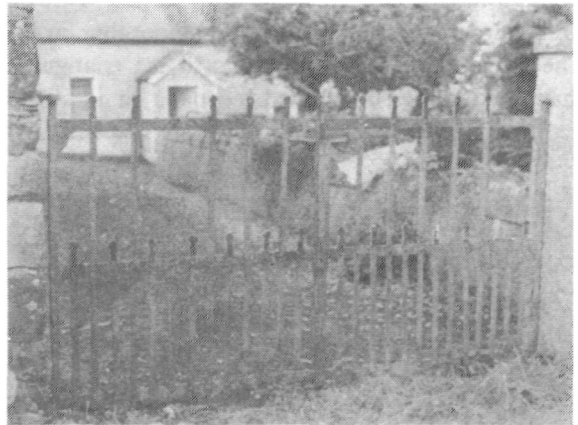
### JEMMY TRAINOR

Jemmy Trainor lived in the townland of Loughadian on the Loughbrickland Road. He was a farrier and his forge was near the Rock Meeting Road/Meenan Road. He worked approximately between 1910 and 1930. The forge

was a wooden structure of which there is no trace and he cycled to it from his home. He later worked in Loughbrickland and the forge there was also a wooden structure, again no trace remains.

### BARNEY CONLON

As far as gates are concerned Barney Conlon most certainly left his mark. His gates not only bear his name, but the date and the village (Poyntzpass) stamped on them, or on most of them. In the local R.C. Graveyard his headstone states he died in 1916, aged 77 years, so he was born around 1839. The Holy Water Font in the R.C. Church was erected by his daughter in his memory.

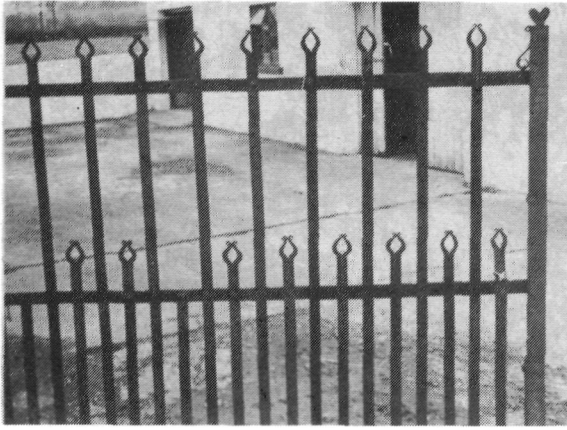


The oldest Conlon gate

The earliest gate I have found to be made by him is on Frank Monaghan's farm, along the Canal Bank, and is dated 22-5-1868. (The day and month are difficult to make out). The morticing is nicely curved into the eye bar on this gate.

All the vertical members (upright bars) of this gate are topped off with a heart, particularly the main middle member. One wonders if it was the farmer or blacksmith who was in the romantic frame of mind! The gates at Morrow's on the Acton Road are marked, B. Conlon P'Pass 1878.

On the Acton Road to Poyntzpass another set of gates stand at the top of the Chapel Hill at the entrance to Carson's field beside Boyce's house. They are marked, B. Conlon P'Pass, either 1881



"Romantic" Conlon gate

or 1884, it is difficult to make the year out. The upright members have a 'penny-topped' finish.

A field gate stands at the entrance to Canavan's field on the Old Road opposite Aughan Park, has the name 'B. Conlon' stamped twice on the bar (or latch) of the gate.

A gate at the entrance to a field beside Aughan Park on the Old Road and another on the Demone Road, are similar in style to the Conlon field gate. The morticed eye bars are all elaborately finished, especially the top cross-bar. Again the twisting on the upper part of the gate is for extra strength. The vertical bars are riveted into place and most of them have held.

Other Conlon gates are at a farmhouse near McCourt's Lake and have passed through the hands of at least three owners, firstly Rice's, then Burns' and now Carson's. They are stamped, B. Conlon P'Pass 9-10-1874. The pillar at one side has been built into the outhouse or the outhouse has been built on to the pillar? The gate on the other side has been extended to include a cattle crush.

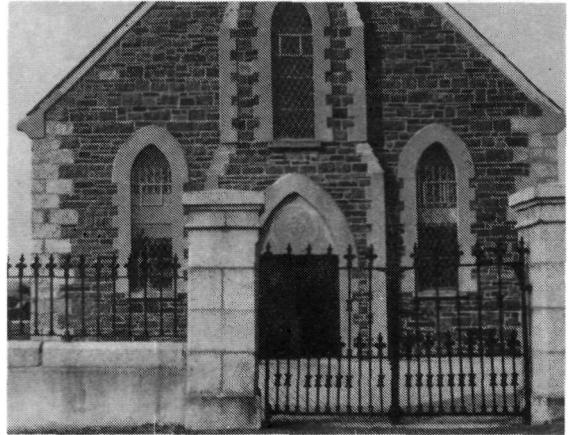
The extension and the cattle crush was probably made by Barney Conlon's grandson Paddy McSherry. Part of the crush was made from old rail track and is stamped, G.N.R.I.

In the same area are gates at the entrance to Miss Mary Magill's home and are stamped, B. Conlon P'Pass 18-1-1888.

The gates at Loy's house on the Old Road are made by B. Conlon and are stamped but it is impossible to make out the markings.

The gates and railings around Glenn R.C. Church are stamped, B. Conlon P'Pass 1883 (?) date difficult to make out.

The gates at the Rock Meeting Manse were also made by B. Conlon.



Gate and Railings at Glenn Chapel

## PADDY McSHERRY

Paddy McSherry was a grandson of Barney Conlon, carrying on the family tradition of Blacksmiths. His father, John was also a blacksmith, and judging by his work, was also a skilled craftsman.

Paddy served his apprenticeship in Dunlop's, Belfast and returned to Poyntzpass around 1920. Most apprentices made their own tools and a hammer made by Paddy during his apprenticeship is still in the family possession.

A plan of the gate was drawn up before commencement of work. A plain gate took about two to three days to make while a more elaborate gate took about a week.

The price of a gate varied but in the 1960's could cost anything up to £50.

All the above information was very kindly supplied by Paddy's son Mr. Raymond McSherry.

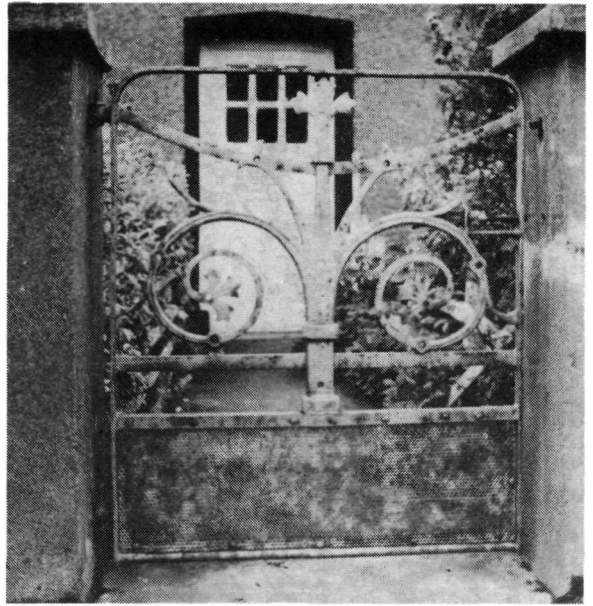
Some good examples of Paddy McSherry's workmanship are:

Gates at entrance to Jim Magill's house, Glassdrummond.

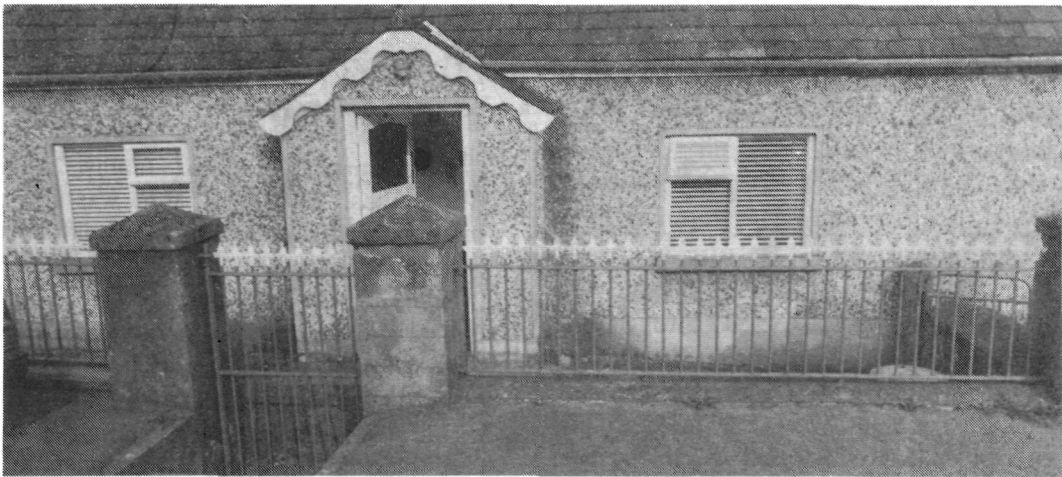
St. Joseph's Primary School gates (1963), at Chapel Hill, thought to be the last set of gates



**Paddy McSherry at work in his forge**



**Gate made from shutter hinge**



**Paddy McSherry gate and railings at Campbells**

made by Paddy.

His ability to make use of "second-hand" materials can be seen in:

Frank McCourt's garden gate, in Chapel Street. This is an old hinge from a window shutter in Dromantine House. Frank asked Paddy to make it into a gate. It cost Frank £25.

The gate at Tommy John McSherry's in Aughan Park was made from a fire guard which was used in the old school before it was demolished.

The gates at Monaghan's house in Acton were made by Paddy in the 1950's. His name and P'Pass are stamped on them. This is also the site of an old forge. (H. Conlon's).

The gates and railings on Peter Campbell's house, Drumbanagher Wall, were made by Paddy McSherry.

## EDMUND LOUGHLIN

Edmund carried on the family tradition of blacksmiths. His brother was a blacksmith as was his father Bob, who originally had his forge in Jerretzpass and later moved to Poyntzpass. What year this happened is not known. Edmund said that the site was Porter's shop though George Porter says he does not remember a forge being there, but there was one further up the road, on the opposite side from the Church Hall. This site is mentioned as a smithy on an ordnance survey map of 1908.

Edmund served his apprenticeship with his father. Robert, Edmund's brother, had intended to become a railway clerk but when his father died he was expected to take over the family business. An old ledger still exists from 1931 and the accounts are recorded in Robert's beautiful copperplate writing.

Just when Edmund started work in the forge, he is not sure, possibly around 1920 or before. Farmers would come from quite a distance if the blacksmith had a good reputation. He made ploughs for farmers from as far away as Crossmaglen.

Again the gates were made to the farmers specification, usually about four feet six inches in height and eight to ten feet long. Belgian iron or Scottish iron was used, the latter being more popular as it was stronger and of better quality.

Gates at "The Fort" on the Blackbridge Road were made by Edmund and are stamped, R. Loughlin.

A set of gates on the Killysavan Road, though not matching, has R. Loughlin stamped on the middle member.

Some of the gates made by Edmund and Robert Loughlin are at Cairn's in William Street and along the Road to Taylorstown. These gates appear to have a unique feature on the central upright member, with what looks like two terrier dog's heads back to back? They are stamped, R. Loughlin, and one is dated 1928.

Edmund had an interest in wrought iron work and made a stairway for the Cairn's in William Street.

Edmund Loughlin died in November, 1985.



Bob Morrow (right) working at the harvest with neighbour Tommy Morrow. Bob's son Edmund is seated in the cart (1923)

## BILLY GRAHAM

Billy's surname was pronounced locally as "Grimes". He did not specialize in gates. Billy served his apprenticeship with Bob Loughlin, Poyntzpass, and went to work in Tyrone's Ditches around the turn of the century. The building had originally been a schoolhouse and was owned by the Church. Part of the building was used to stable horses at service time on Sundays.

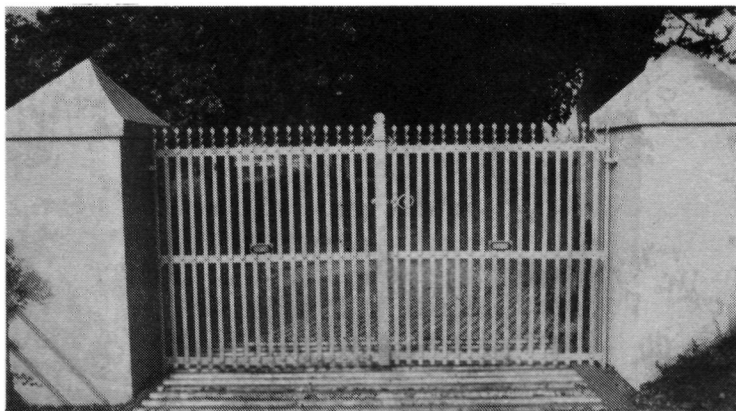
This building came up for sale by Public Auction and Billy was advised to buy it by a man called Lundy. He didn't think he would be able to afford it as he had just started up his own business but Lundy told him he would be a fool not to buy it. The day of the auction came and Billy did some bidding but had to stop as it was above his price range. Others continued to bid on, including Lundy who eventually got the final bid. When settling up he told the auctioneers to make it over Billy Graham. As business improved Billy was able to pay him back.

Billy lived beside the forge and had a family of seven girls. Their accommodation consisted of a kitchen and one bedroom.

Apparently Billy was a wonderful character and not above playing a few practical jokes. One Shrove Tuesday a young lad came to get an iron fixed. Billy said he couldn't do it until he had a pancake sieve, so, of course, the lad asked where



**Edmund Loughlin**



**Gates at "The Fort" Blackbridge Road**



**Billy Graham**



**Robert Loughlin**



**Billy Graham's forge, Tyrone's Ditches**



he could get one and was told to try Tommy Sleith, which he did, Tommy said he couldn't find it but to try Mrs. Corry. When he got to Mrs. Corry she took pity on him and told him the truth and gave him some apples along with a message to Billy 'Grimes' that she had broken the sieve!

After a horse was shod and was being led out he would have put a cold clinker under the tail, unknown to the farmer. The horse would sit down then and would not move. Billy would suggest that the horse might have colic, that he was shod alright and to try Tommy Sleith for a medicine bottle. The poor farmer would go for Tommy and when he was away Billy removed the clinker and the horse would be up on his feet when the farmer and Tommy returned with the medicine. Billy would remark that the horse seemed to be better and not to bother with the medicine.

Billy smoked a clay pipe and custom at the time was to hand it around. Unknown to most people, Billy put a small hole in the bowl of his pipe and covered the hole with his finger while puffing away at the pipe. He would then pass it on to whoever was in the forge at the time, of course the pipe went out and any amount of puffing didn't help. The comment Billy made was that Haire's (local shop) pipes weren't up to much!

It is said that he was a clever man and was often sent for to 'doctor' cattle. Many people could not afford a vet—even if one was available.

(Miss M. Savage, Mr. Bill Fisher and Mr. Jim McIlroy supplied the above information.)

## JOHN CLARKE

John Clarke was a blacksmith at Eleven Lane Ends and worked from the latter part of the 1890's up to his death in the 1940's.

Three field gates on Harry O'Hare's farm are made by John Clarke. Each has a diamond-shaped notch on the upright bar (latch-side) and this appears to have been a trade mark of his. Harry's grandfather was very friendly with John Clarke. Their farm is situated in the townland of Maevemacullen.

The "horse-shoe" gate at O'Hare's house was made by John Clarke. They are very similar in style to those of Jack Davidson's



John Clarke (Circa. 1912)

John Clarke had his name stamped on the gates of Ballenon Reformed Presbyterian Church. The upright bars are all decoratively finished with a floral design.

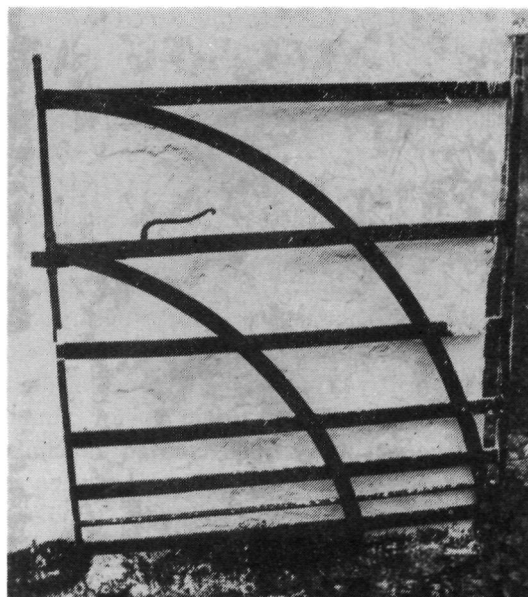
He also got the name of being a practical joker. A man came to him to get a griddle fixed which John duly did. The man got on his bike to return home but had difficulty steering the bike and holding the griddle at the same time. John helped him by placing the griddle crossways over one shoulder, and while doing so wrote "No Pope" on it. Just as he was about to take off John asked him if he would do him a favour and call at Haire's shop and get some nails. The man agreed and called at the shop. Of course, nobody was in any hurry to serve him and they kept him chatting to whoever was there unaware of what was written on the griddle!



John Clarke's Forge, Eleven Lane Ends



The hearth and bellows in John Clarke's forge



A John Clarke gate at O'Hare's farm, Maevemacullen

### JEMMY MOONEY

Originally his family are thought to have come from Monaghan, or in that direction. Jemmy Mooney worked for John Clarke for years but had some disagreement with him and left to work at Tyrone's Ditches. He worked there after Billy Graham, from about 1940 till sometime in the 1950's.

It is said he was a good blacksmith if somewhat slow. He did not specialise in gates.

### JOHN BROWN

John Brown was apprenticed to John Clarke and had not finished his time when John Clarke died. Prior to John Clarke's death he had been doing most of his work and continued until sometime in the 1950's/1960's.

The gates at D. Adams' were made by John Brown in 1954. He now lives in Portadown.

### NED MURTAGH

Ned Murtagh lived and worked in Lissummon, he originally came from Derryleckagh (between Newry and Rathfriland). He served his time with a man called Fleming in Derryleckagh and commenced work in Lissummon in the 1900's. The forge was beside Lissummon Old Chapel and

is mentioned in a 1908 Ordnance Survey Map of the area. He made farm implements and gates.

Ned's daughter was Mrs, Pat Campbell, who lived in Poyntzpass on the Newry Road. Most of this information was given by her sister living in Loughgilly.

Brian Rafferty, Lesh Road, Lissummon has a gate made by Ned and his name is stamped on the bar. Brian worked for him sometime in the 1930/1940's and he found him a difficult man to get on with.

Railings at Graham's house, Lissummon on the road to Newry were made by him.

An Arthur McCourt served his time with Ned Murtagh and he later emigrated to South Africa.

### ANDY McPARLAND

Andy McParland had his forge in Scarva but lived in Acton in Harry McClorey's house. He apparently assembled railway gates. These were made in Dundalk and are supposed to resemble "Sunburst". Extra bars had to be made and placed in the lower part of the gates to stop sheep and dogs getting through.



Ned Murtagh

## WILSON

This blacksmiths forge was beside the railway bridge on the Poyntzpass side at Drumbanagher; part of the building still remains. He specialised in gate making and a feature of his gate was a bird's head (goose or duck?), this was referred to locally as a 'Wilson's gate'.

His grandson is our former postman Alfie Donalson. Alfie does not know his grandfather's Christian name as he died long before Alfie was born. He does know that a Joe Agnew brought his granfather Wilson from Rathfriland to this area. Wilson died tragically, drowning in the Newry Canal, at 36 years of age. Apparently he had gone to Newry for provisions and had forgotten to get nails for shoeing horses. He went back to town to get them, took a wrong turning mistaking the Canal for the road and went into the Canal. They recovered his body but were unable to revive him. Wilson's daughter (Alfie's mother) was about six years old when this happened. Shortly after this Wilson's wife died and Alfie's mother was placed in an orphanage.

## CHRISTOPHER McCLEAN

Christopher McClean lived and worked in Loughbrickland in the Old Street. Johnny McKee now lives in this house and his garage was the site of the old forge. McClean worked around the turn of the century. His daughter was a school inspector.

## N. IRVINE

This blacksmith was from Banbridge. Two local gates were made by him, one is at Frank Monaghan's, Canal Bank and the other at Billy Smyth's, Loughadian. Billy says the gate on his farm is about 50 years old. The top crossbar mortice to the eye bar has come apart on Frank Monaghan's gate—could this be due to the fact that the mortice is right angled and not curved as seen in the earlier gates?



Present-day gatemaker, Gerald Hudson



## POINTS OF INTEREST

My thanks to Miss M. Savage, Laurel Hill, for the following information:—

“It was often said that the roof of a blacksmith’s could never be kept on because of ‘eek’—sweat from the horses giving rise to damp and steam—which rusted the nails in the roof!

An occupational hazard of a blacksmith was thought to be arthritis.

Two Toll Gate Pillars are still standing on Miss Savage’s property. These Pillars were originally from McCann’s Corner on the Newry to Armagh Road. The Toll Gates were discontinued around 1856 when rail travel came into vogue.”

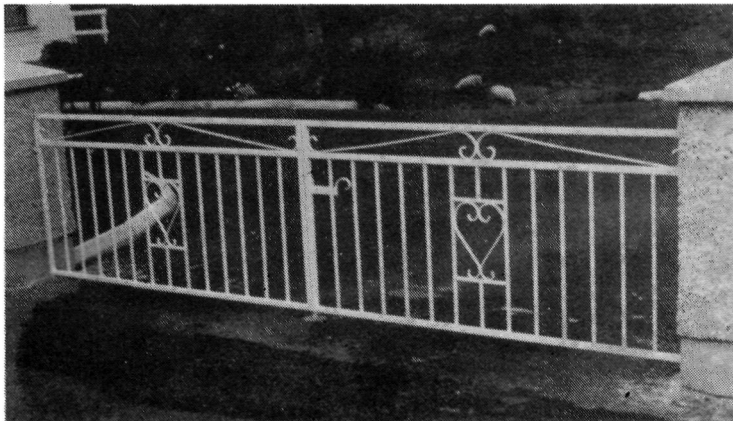
And to Tommy John McSherry, Aughan Park, for the following:—

Cartwheels were shod in the summertime as the wood dried up leaving the iron rim loose. Shoeing carts was quite an operation and required the assistance of three to four men. The rim was removed from the cart and heated. As each part of the rim was heated slack was thrown on it to keep the iron hot. As soon as the rim was put on the wheel buckets of cold water were thrown

over it to keep the wooden part of the wheel from burning.

Tommy’s father was a stonemason and as a boy he would go with him to a building in progress. If a pillar was being built, the diameter was first decided, usually about three feet, a peg was placed in the centre of the base. A cord or a tape was then placed on the peg, this cord measured eighteen inches. Each day the peg was knocked up as the pillar was being built. The eye for the gate had a long arm with three prongs at the end, rather like a claw and this was placed downwards in the centre of the pillar as it was built. Because of its shape the eye was very secure and able to hold the weight of the gate.

A blacksmith usually knew what shoes would fit his customers horses and kept a supply ready in stock. It was then only a matter of shoeing and little time was incurred. The nails did not go in directly but at an angle and were ‘cribbed’ where they emerged from the hoof. The reason for this being that they did not touch the ‘quick’ with the possibility of making the horse lame.



A Gerald Hudson gate