

THE FORTTOWNS:

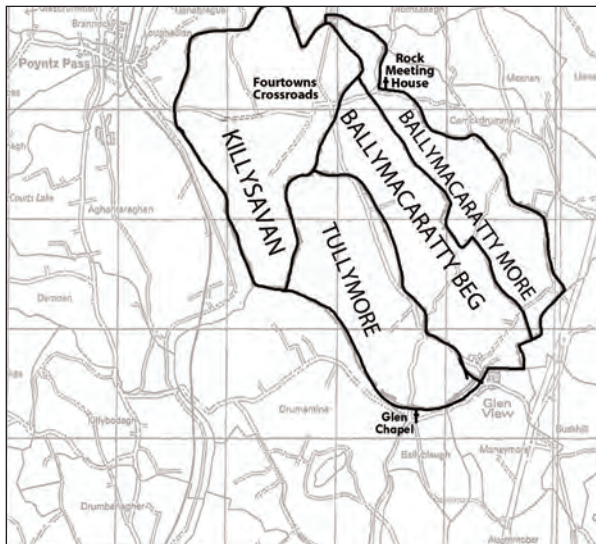
SNAPSHOTS OF A RURAL COMMUNITY: 1930s – 1970s

BY HELEN DELAHUNTY

What, and where are “The Fourtowns”?

These are the four town lands of Tullymore, Killysavan, Ballymacarattymore and Ballymacarattymore, at the northern edge of the district of Clanagan or Glen, and at the western edge of the ancient parish of Donaghmore.

Why call these particular four townlands “The Fourtowns”? Local people say, “Because there are four townlands”; not a convincing answer in a country where the traditional and still prevailing system of land law is the town land. Ireland has approximately 62,000 townlands.



The Fourtowns

Dr. Cowan in his “*Donaghmore, an Ancient Irish Parish*,” (1911) writes:

“*The Fourtowns seem to have always been closely associated and there must be some valid reason for this ancient tie that still binds them together.*”

In the Patent Roll of James I in 1611 Ballytullaghmore (Killysavan and Tullymore) are mentioned but not Ballymacarattymore or More so it is hard to find an “ancient tie” there.

The first printed reference to the Fourtowns that I have found is this in 1797 about the Fourtowns Pikemen.

THE FORTTOWNS INSURGENT

John Shanks, while a shop boy in Newry, joined the ranks of the United Irishmen and having returned to his home on the borders of Down and Armagh, East of Poyntzpass, formed a company of volunteers known as “The Fourtowns boys” whose pikes were forged by Kerr, the local blacksmith.

The notorious Welsh Fencibles – the Bloody Britons – who were very prominent in the District raided the Four-Towns in October 1797 and burned many houses irrespective of the political views of the inhabitants.

Shanks, it would appear hid in a turf stack but was discovered by the Fencibles when they set the stack on fire. He was taken prisoner on the way to Newry but escaped and eventually made his way to Baltimore in America where he waited till things had cooled down in Ireland. He returned in 1807 and found employment with William Dinsmore of Loughadrian, a linen weaver on a large scale in those days.

He married a young woman called Ringland in 1810 and was buried in the Rock Meeting House green between Poyntzpass and Loughbrickland on his death in 1825.

Colin Johnston-Robb.

However, if this means that the name was in common usage, where and when did it originate? In searching the records, it seems that the Earl of Clanwilliam, through his marriage in 1766 to Theodosia, heiress of the Gill-Hall and Burrenwood estates (Gilford and Rathfriland) had inherited, through his bride, these four town lands and no other of the twenty six townlands in the Parish of Donaghmore or the district of Glen. That may be the origin of the name. Topographically, the Fourtowns is a classic Co. Down landscape of drumlins divided by raised bogs, created through the deposit of the debris accumulated

underneath the glacier of the last Ice Age (c. 10,000 BCE) when it became overloaded with sediment. The bogs are the area scoured out by the passage of the glacier, which then became recipient of the drainage from the hills. The soil is generally medium loam which has made this one of the best farming areas in Ireland. The Fourtowns is almost totally a farming economy which was traditionally single owner small farms in a mixture of sheep and cattle raising, with corn, flax and root vegetables grown on the arable land. Since the 1980s this has gradually changed into a landscape of four or so large farmers, three quarters of whom have dairy herds of approx 150-170 cows.

This article is focusing on the Fourtowns and its people in the last decades of this era of small-ish (fifteen to seventy or so acres) mixed farms in single family, self supporting units, roughly from the 1930s through to the early 1970s when the arrival of the EU and the arrival of universal TV coincided to change the economic and social patterns of rural Ireland forever. As larger farms dominate the landscape and the economy so now does the influence of TV dominate the social life of the community.

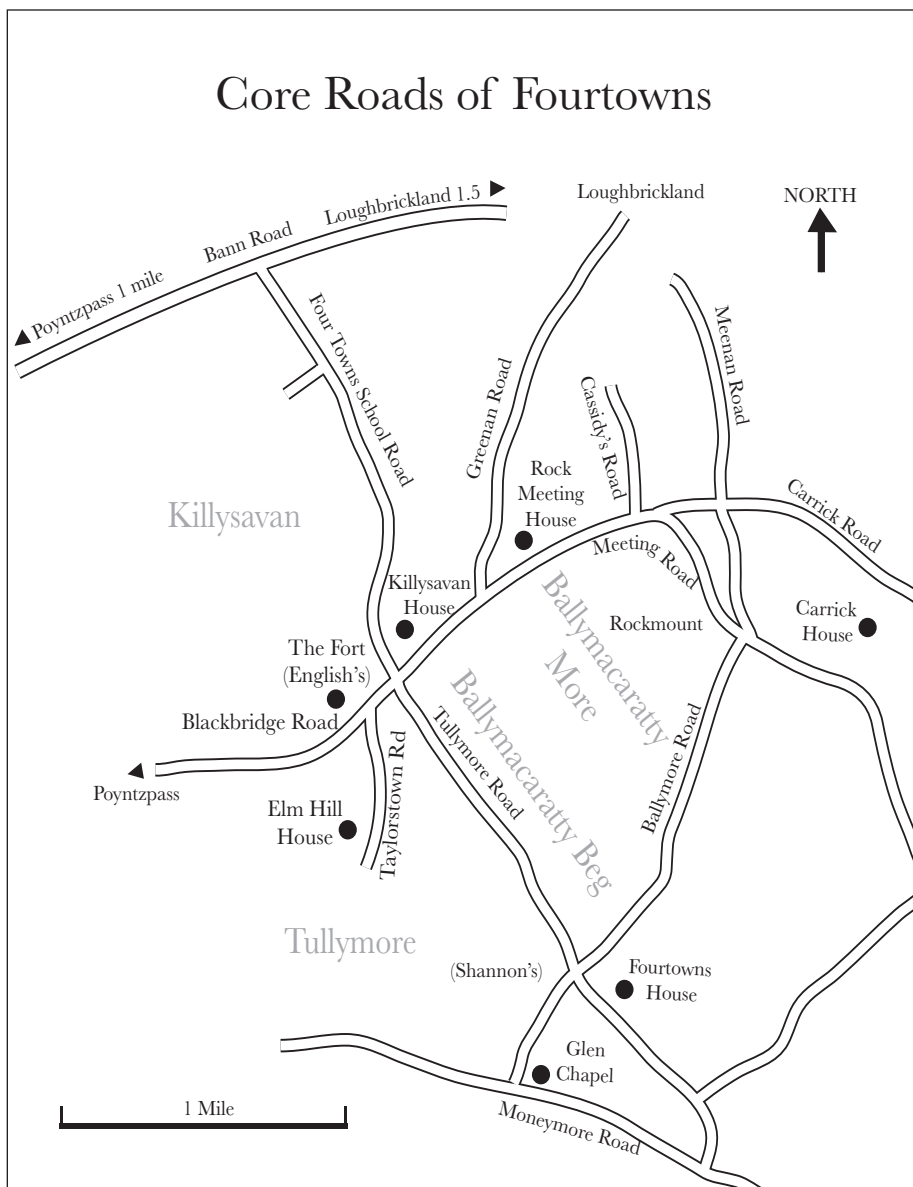
The three institutions which to some extent defined the area in the mid 20th c. were Fourtowns Primary School, Fourtowns Presbyterian Church and Glen Chapel. Previous issues of the Society's magazine "Before I Forget" have documented all of these.

The heart of the Fourtowns would be a circle of roads, approximately four miles in circumference - Tullymore, Ballymore and Rock Meeting Roads. Four solid houses, at the south, east, north and west could roughly stand as perimeters of the district. Firstly, the house known to us as 'the Fourtowns' built in the early 19th c which the Bryson family owned. Two brothers Robert and Arthur Bryson presumably lived there in the late 1850s since when Robert married Mary Ann Graham in Fourtowns church in 1860 he gave Fourtowns as his Place of Residence and Mary Ann cited Whoopstown, (near Ballymena.) Co Antrim as hers. Interestingly Robert was a widower yet there is no evidence in church records of either his previous marriage or his baptism. Perhaps he had worked and married first in Co Antrim where presumably he had

later met Mary Ann. Robert was one of three brothers and two sisters; their first cousin was the esteemed Rev John Bryson, forty seven years minister in Fourtowns Presbyterian Church.

Robert and Mary Ann had three sons and two daughters, one of whom, James in 1903 married Sarah Wylie of Killysavan House (the house on the northern edge of the area); at the same time his sister Agnes married Robert George Wylie of Killysavan House. James and Sarah had five sons and one daughter. On his death in 1931 James left each of the sons a farm in the Fourtowns; hence the Brysons and the Wylies and their intermarried relatives, the Shannons and the Copelands dominated the economic life of Fourtowns for almost all of the 20th c. While the origins of the Wylie family are obscure they are named in the earliest tenant lists of the Earl of Clanwilliam in Killysavan townland before 1800. Perhaps it is worth noting that that whole family has now died out, the last member dying in 2004.

The most interesting house in the area is on the Ballymore Road, now owned by Eugene and Ann Murtagh.





Four houses : (clockwise from top left) Fourtowns House; Carrick House; Elm Hill; Killysavan House.

Its exact date of construction is uncertain, though probably 1719. It is a Class C listed “historical” farmhouse. The house is built of stone with a wooden framework as its inside layer. Packed into this framework are turf sods. ‘Weeping sand’ plaster covered this. No wallpaper would stay on those walls for more than a week; if you wanted wallpaper it had to be nailed on. The house came into the ownership of the Fitzpatrick family around 1832.

Leonard Malone owned this house from 1953 until his death in 1985.

Leonard was probably the most famous eccentric character in the Fourtowns. My sister in law Margaret’s first encounter with him around 1970, and she just arrived from the metropolis of Belfast, perhaps best gives his flavour. It was a hot day, Leonard came down



Leonard Malone with neighbour, Ian Copeland



Two- story white house: ‘Fitzpatricks’, later Leonard Malone’s 1719 house.

the road wearing his perennial plus fours, his Moses sandals, sockless, the calves of his legs covered in pink calamine lotion to prevent sunburn, his face likewise and for the same reason, on his head a handkerchief knotted at all four corners; all might have been well had he not attempted to doff his handkerchief, so to speak, to the new Mrs Copeland,...but then the dilemma of

re-placing it became a severe test for such perfect courtesy.

Leonard had famous feuds, one with the Glen parish priest led to his painting the windowsills of the house red, white and blue. On wet days he rode around on his high bicycle, in plus fours, sandals, holding an umbrella over his head while riding. He had inherited this house from his distant aunt, Minnie Fitch with whom he had lived since the 1930s. Minnie's given name was Margaret Fitzpatrick, the last of the family who had lived there since 1832 when Michael Fitzpatrick had married Mary McMullan. Minnie was the local dressmaker and seamstress, "Minnie Fitch/of gentle stitch.", as she was memorialised in local verse. Leonard kept the house and lived in the way it would have been for the past two hundred years; the bellows, the tripod, the iron kettle, the outhouse.



Fireplace with tripod: Leonard Malone's cooking stove.

On up the Ballymore Road were and are the McSherrys and it was the present generation's father, John McSherry who made the fan bellows for the Malones. John had inherited some land from his father and was well known in Fourtowns for advising other farmers to "grow a bit of flax because you get paid for it by July 31 before the corn or the potato harvest come in, and it tides you over". He grew a lot of flax during WW2 and made good money. John was a Master Cooper too, having learned the trade from his father, Charlie. He made and hooped barrels and did a good trade since farmers needed barrels to catch rainwater. John made churns and butter paddles as well. The noise of all this, "terrible", said Sheena Copeland Boyd, resounded all down the Ballymore Rd. As well as a cooper John was a good all round handyman, in demand to fix walls etc.

Anne McSherry Cairns remembers that Maj. Gen. Beaumont Nesbit would drive up in an, to Fourtowns eyes in early 1950s, exotic station wagon to collect her father to work on repairing the Lisnabrague Lodge wall on the Bann Rd. (Poynzpass – Loughbrickland). Since John was as famous for his ability to talk and recount

stories as he was for building and coopering it is no surprise that this wall took seven years to repair.

Before the Ballymore Road runs into Rock Meeting Road stands a two room solid stone cottage, now abandoned but still with an old horsehair iron bedstead in one room and an overstuffed decrepit armchair lying in the other.

Jemmy McCoy, a farm labourer famous for wearing hobnail boots on all occasions which could be heard up and down the quiet roads, lived on in this house after his mother died until his own death in 1959. He walked everywhere – down to Glen Chapel a few times per week, to Poynzpass every Thursday to buy his groceries, to Barr Parochial Hall where he was doorman for the dances and bingo, to the Fourmile for the Glen GAA games where he collected the admission money. Jemmy was a hard worker and good company –and maybe the Fourtowns's first 'socialist', at least in regard to timekeeping and hours worked. He arrived at work exactly at 8 am and would leave exactly at 6 pm, no matter what urgency or what job needed to be finished. "Quitting Time" he would announce even if in the middle of untying sheaves at a thresher, and down he would climb.



Harvesting in the Fourtowns in the 1940s.

When Jemmy died in 1959 his friend Hughie Battersby saw a good house going empty and moved in. Hughie was a different man from Jemmy. Never renowned for his hard work, Hughie had two goats and three yappy small dogs. An orphan, he had lived in a Home until he was 16 and may have come to Fourtowns via a hiring fair. On occasion he slept in a loft but eventually had a small shack-like house at Kildartan (in the field above

what is now known as Battersby's house). One night in a really bad storm the tin roof blew off. John McSherry or Jemmy McCoy went the next morning to see how he was and found Hughie sitting drinking a mug of tea, "Come in, boy", he said "Business as usual. Business as usual."

Another story of Hughie in this storm has also been told about Barney Murphy so it may be a 'rural myth' story. "Ah, boy, sure, what's to complain? I got free water and free electricity delivered in the one night."

He moved to a house at Frankfurt, Donaghmore for the winter. It had no door so he put a harrow in the doorway. Whenever he felt like work he would go up to Robert Bryson at Carrick House and before he would come into the kitchen would want to know, "Is the Big Un in today?" He didn't work consistently for any one farmer but would be called on by many farmers for seasonal labour. Baking soda for his stomach was a constant demand. He smoked continuously –Sheena Boyd said he would take a drag of a cigarette and you would watch it go right down to his toes and up again before Hughie blew out the smoke. Anne Cairns said he was well used to sleeping rough since "Many's a night he would fall asleep by the roadside coming home from the Sheepbridge Inn." The McSherry sons – Paddy, Ciaran, Lee, Noel took Hughie to hospital when he became really sick. It seems likely that Mrs John McSherry as well as Johnny McKnight looked after him a lot.

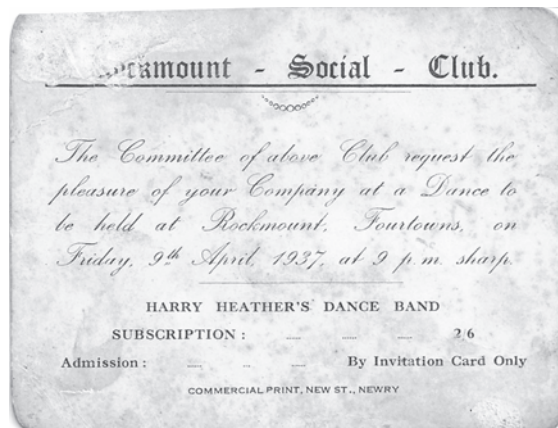
ROCKMOUNT SOCIAL CLUB

We grew up hearing stories from our mother about the dances at Rockmount. It sounded as though a dance would be on every Saturday night but that may not have been the case.

The Carswell family (now mainly in Donaghmore) built 'Rockmount' around 1840. The last of the family in the Fourtowns, Joseph, owned Rockmount until his death in 1926. He left the house to a nephew, John Barkley who rented it out to various people until George Bryson bought the house and farm in 1938. One teacher, Miss Bacon began a cookery class for the older girls at Fourtowns School in Rockmount in the winter of 1935. Sheena Copeland, Doris Kirkland, Helen Smart and

Susie Ingram were among the attendees.

According to Sheena this same teacher began dancing lessons there once a week in November 1935. These dancing classes had begun the previous winter in the Ranton Orange Hall in Donaghmore but the men of the hall wanted the hall back for themselves so Sam Cupples suggested Rockmount.



Formal Dance Invitation

On the opening and closing night of the classes a Dance Band from Newry came out to play. This was Harry Heather's Dance Band, with Harry playing piano, Vincent Fox on drums and singing and Miss Gordon on the violin. So popular were these dances that they began to happen every three months and became "By Invitation Card Only" written with the appropriate elegance. Robert Reid from Dromore remembers his parents saying that they came, so the fame of these dances was far wider than just that of the local area. They seem to have continued into the war, at least till about 1942.

STONE SAFES

A feature of the roadsides throughout the Fourtowns, as in several other rural areas, has been the "stone safe". Loads of small gravel would be left there in the springtime each year so that the roadmen could use the gravel to repair the potholes during the summer. Between the 1950s and the early 1980s the two roadmen in the Fourtowns were Jemmy McGivern and Frank Kennedy. They rode push bikes and carried their tools with them; Jemmy carried a billhook and Frank had the harder job of manoeuvring the scythe on the handlebars of his bike. Frank always rode on the inside of the pair, for safety reasons. Their main job was to clean out culverts and ditches likely to overflow and flood the roads, as well as cutting the grass and weeds along the roadside so that they did not impede traffic. But in the summer came the infinitely trickier job of mending potholes. One of them would balance the bucket of tar on the handlebars of the bike, then ladle some tar into a pothole; the other would shovel in gravel from a small handcart. A few thumps with the back of the shovel would (sort of) level out and hammer down the gravel; the rest would be left to passing wheels to complete. However, this was no help to we schoolgoers who rode our bikes home from the service bus at the



Rockmount

ROADMEN



Frank Kennedy



Jimmy McGivern

“Broad Road” (the A1). As we flew down hills avoidance of this sticky tar-ry mess was impossible and our bikes and clothes would be splattered. Much butter was needed to get the tar out of our school uniforms.

Roadmen: Frank Kennedy and Jemmy McGivern

Jemmy and Frank made their tea over a small fire in a billycan every morning and afternoon. Jemmy carried two tablespoons of tea leaves in a twist of newspaper. Frequently though they arranged their working schedule to be near a friendly house where the ‘missus’ would make them tea and offer a piece of newly baked bread. Even better was to be at such a house at dinner time when broth and bread would be offered. Jemmy McGivern was a favourite because he was good crack and had news of the countryside; Frank was more taciturn but that seemed to make for a good working partnership.

Taylorstown Races:

The Newry Harriers held their first point to point in 1932 at Mullaghglass but had moved the venue over to the Fourtowns by 1935 to land that Noel Wylie and Jim and John Copeland owned. From the 1950s to the 1980s at least, it was a big sporting day in March for the surrounding towns as well as for the local area. Buses came from Newry, Banbridge and Armagh and trains brought crowds from Belfast and Portadown to Poyntzpass station. Crowds would be five or six deep all along the final furlong. Anne McSherry Cairns remembers that she and her sisters in the 1950s would get new dresses to wear to the races. She recalls their excitement at seeing all the buses lined up and hearing the ‘foreign’ accents of the crowd as well as watching the three-card-trick men. “We were, as children,

warned well away from them – all right to lose your shilling to the bookies but not to be a total eejit!”

Several of the local farmers rode in the Hunt Race – George and Jim Bryson, Sam English, Harry Ferris, and later on, sons of some of these men, which added great local interest.



In the mid 1980s the point to point course moved west by one field, across the Taylorstown Road unto land which Harry Thompson who had bought Noel Wylie’s Elm Hill farm (the western perimeter house), now owns. *George and Jim Bryson ahead of Sam English at ‘Taylorstown’ point to point. Note six –deep crowd!*

Bachelor Farmers in the Fourtowns

“Ireland 1916” Yeats wrote:

*“I write it out in a verse
MacDonagh and McBride
And Connolly and Pearse..”*

Yeats wrote out the names to honour these men.

Writing out the names of the bachelor farmers and labourers of the Fourtowns is an honouring of these mostly kind, taciturn, solitary men, usually seen together at threshing times. I remember dinner times at threshings when out of the sixteen men sitting down at two tables twelve were bachelors ranging in age from their forties to their sixties.

We were witnessing the last generation of a phenomenon peculiar to Ireland in world history since 1845: the predominance of bachelor farmers and farm labourers in rural society.

**Jemmy McMahan
Geordie Lister
John Copeland
Robert Wylie
William Wylie
Herbie Bryson
Johnny Sterritt
Leonard Malone**

Bertie Copeland
Ted O'Hare
Harry Waddell
Tommy O'Hare
Bob Waddell
Hughie Battersby
Jim McCrink
James Young
Matt McCrink
Johnny McKnight
Robert McClelland
Barney Murphy
Jemmy Dinsmore
Jemmy McCoy
Sam English
Noel Wylie

Much of the comment and analysis on the effects of the Irish Potato Famine of 1845-47 focuses on the large continuous emigration from Ireland in the subsequent generations and its consequences in and for those immigrant societies; much less attention has focused on emigration's traumatic effect on Irish life itself.

Within one generation of the 1845-46 famine its impact on the social and economic organization of rural Ireland became apparent. "Never again" was the spoken and unspoken watchword; never again would farms be so divided and subdivided among sons as they were pre-1844, that a family would have to survive on an eighth of an acre, depending only on 'lumper' potatoes.

Dr Kenneth Connell, at QUB during the 1960s, did the pioneer work on analysing how and why this happened. He described the emergence of a household system in rural Ireland that limited marriage to a single favoured son and daughter in each generation. In the 'stem' family a farmer would retire, turn the farm over to a chosen successor.

One son, not necessarily the eldest, would inherit the family land holding; the rest of the siblings would emigrate or join the Church. The daughter would receive a dowry and marry a local man of proper social rank, preferably a farmer whose land 'marched' her father's. The son who inherited the farm was reluctant to bring a wife into what was his mother's domain. Thus, it became the custom to wait for the death of the mother before the son married. Three results of this were:

- (i) That by the time of the mother's death the son may have become too set in his ways to take the risk of marriage
- (ii) That the eligible women had either married or emigrated.
- (iii) That an unmarried sister or aunt had assumed the house keeping role on the farm - economic and social comfort had been restored!

A side note here is, of all the European countries in the second half of the nineteenth century witnessing mass emigration, Ireland is the only country where, by 1890

more women (1150:1000) than men leave.

Dr. Connell held also that the Land Acts from 1868 - 1903 allowed rural people to accrue property for the first time; before the Acts any material gain in a property would enhance the landlord, now the first time owner could be reasonably sure of keeping it, a powerful incentive to make sure land holdings would not be split up again.

The 1901 and 1911 censuses confirm the pattern: 27% of males and 25% of females aged 25 - 46 are unmarried in rural Ireland compared to 12%/16% in England and roughly the same in western Europe.

The Census asks for Head of Household and spouse to be so labelled. Demographers call all other members of the household, apart from servants, "extensions". Extensions 'down' are children; 'up' are parents; 'lateral' are unmarried siblings. The 1911 census showed 35% of 'extensions' as children, 23% as older people but 32% are unmarried siblings.

This leads into Dr. Timothy Guinane's central focus in his 1991 study "*The Vanishing Irish*" (Yale University Press, 1997).

Connell had said that the only barrier between a man and marriage was lack of land, yet the 1911 census shows that by age 55, forty per cent of all unmarried males were Head of Household and that there were more single men among the wealthiest than the poorer farmers.

Connell's purely economic explanation for non-marriage is not enough; Guinane says we must look at the role of religion, personality and culture as well. With regard to the Church; if the Roman Catholic Church's influence were an important consideration we would expect to see differences between Protestants and Catholics yet the 1901 and 1911 censuses state that 22% of the former as opposed to 25% of the latter never married. So the stereotypical sexual repression of the Catholic Church is not necessarily the answer.

Guinane has two questions: one he would ask of landless bachelors and spinsters who stayed in Ireland knowing they were unlikely to marry: "*Why did you remain rather than join the emigrant outflow that took so many of your friends and family?*" and the other to celibate Heads of Household: "*How can you explain the fact that you had your household but never married?*"

Since one half of the never-married people had no resources why did they not emigrate? Guinane says the answer is found in the dimension of security - Ireland offered security of kith and kin, in a culture and ethos that placed great stress on familial obligations. When we look at the list of Fourtowns bachelors from this viewpoint we note the communality of married, extended family in the area and the communality of chapel/church, pub and sport among the farm labourers.

“Perhaps what made a man too old to marry was the fact that living his life without wife and family for so many years meant that he had arrived at ways of socializing and organizing his life that made marriage less attractive to him at age forty five than it might have been at age thirty.” (Guinanne p.220)

And what was the chief aid to these “ways of socialising and organizing his life”? Siblings. Siblings who remained with a married brother (or indeed, unmarried brother or sister) might be in dependant positions socially but they shared in household resources, comforts and companionship (even if taciturn).

Every brother who decided not to marry created a place for an unmarried sister and every sister who remained ‘loyal’ reduced the importance of marriage for her brother”

Reading through the list of Fourtowns bachelor farmers and farm labourers amply supports Guinanne’s thesis; that by the 20th century permanent celibacy had achieved a cultural norm, made comfortable by the economic and emotional support of an (un)married sibling or siblings. Out of the twenty four men on the list above fifteen lived either with (an)other unmarried sibling(s) or with a married sister/brother.

By the 1950s and early 1960s in rural Ireland what Guinanne calls ‘permanent celibacy’ had become as culturally acceptable as marriage. Institutions and social organizations had accommodated this way of life.

But within a generation, from the 1960s to the 1980s, with the coming of the electronic TV age this social and economic phenomenon virtually disappeared; perhaps this is a principal reason to acknowledge the contribution of these men to the wealth of stories their eccentricity provoked, as well as their material contribution to the next generation of nieces and

nephews in the form of land, houses, etc.

Anne McSherry Cairns, in reflecting on the Fourtowns during this time, has stated;

“It occurred to me that the Fourtowns, although a group of individuals, possessed talents and skills that made it almost self-sufficient! For instance the larger farm owners as well as supplying food, gave employment to neighbours.

Most houses had a garden to grow potatoes, other vegetables and fruit. Garden produce was freely exchanged among the neighbours.

The artisans (blacksmith and cooper) made or repaired farm implements for neighbours and those further afield.

The dressmaker made or altered clothes for the local families and others.

The housewives baked, cooked, harvested, and stored food for the entire year.

Most families had either a cow or a goat for milk and butter.

Pigs were killed and cured for protein. Chickens were similarly used; mature hens produced eggs which produced money for the woman of the house.

One or two farmers would be skilled animal diagnosticians e.g Johnny McKnight, and would carry out veterinary services.

Neighbouring soirees provided entertainment and a matchmaking opportunity. Often someone played the accordion or an old piano. Saturday nights or Sunday afternoons (the only day off in the week) were the favoured times. Mrs John McSherry on the Ballymore Road was well known for her welcoming hospitality. People who brought along a musical instrument or had a good singing voice were especially welcome. Maids and farm labourers often ‘met their match’ through working for the same householder, or at one of these soirees.

Who needed a metropolis!”



(L to R) Mickey Gillen, Pat McCrink, Jemmy McCoy (and hobnail boots), Winnie Sands, Johnny McKnight; Harvest –time in Johnny’s field’