

# TALES FROM THE FORTTOWNS

LEWIS SMART STORIES



*Flax in Stooks*

## FLAXHOLE STORY:

*During the First war there was a great demand for flax. The whole country was putting in flax. I'm sure you know one stage in the production of flax is when the beets (sheaves) of flax were put in water in flaxholes for two or three weeks, weighed down by big stones. This stage was known as 'retting'. It wasn't a nice job for you had to stand in water when you were putting the stones in and again when taking the beets out. Because of the demand, all the existing old flaxholes were in use and new ones dug. Then in 1918, when the war ended, the demand for flax fell away and many of the flaxholes were abandoned but around here they weren't filled in.*

*When the Second World War broke out there was an upsurge in demand again and flax growing again became widespread. The old flaxholes were needed once more and had to be cleaned out. In cleaning out one old flaxhole down below here at the fork of Fourtowns School Road and Smart's Hill, they found a beet (sheaf) of flax which had been in the old flaxhole from 1918. It was remarkably well preserved. When the flaxhole was filled with the new flax beets a short time after, this old beet was put back into the water again.*

*Knowing when the flax was ready to be taken out of the flaxhole was something of a skill and there was in the Fourtowns a man who was regarded as an authority on this and sometimes consulted to decide whether the flax was ready to be taken out or not.*

*When it was thought that the new flax in the flaxhole in question was about ready, the old fellow was asked for his opinion. "Well, what do you think? Is it ready?" He was handed the ancient beet and having looked at it knowingly said "I think I'd give it another day or two!"*



*The overgrown flaxhole today.*

## GEORDIE'S HILL

The hill from what is called 'Fourtowns School Road' leading to its junction with Meenan Road is known as 'Geordie's Hill'. The Geordie in the title was one Geordie Hear (Hare or O'Hare) who lived on that road a hundred or more years ago.



**The Crown House**

Geordie Hear was fond of a drink and was a regular customer in the Crown House, which was a public house at that time. On one occasion, as he made his way home after spending the evening in the Crown House, Geordie had an unusual experience. He said that as he climbed the hill "a barrel a' flames" came out through a field gate and rolled down the hill towards him. He had to jump into the hedge to let it past. At the bottom of the hill, the barrel turned right and headed for Drumsallagh. Geordie put it down to the devil or the presence of evil spirits, but his neighbours knew rightly that it was the presence of spirits of a different kind that caused Geordie Hear to meet the 'barrel a' flames' but the incident, real or imaginary, led to this hill being known as 'Geordie's Hill'.



**Geordie's Hill**

### Barney Murphy Senior

One of the most celebrated characters from the Fourtowns whose deeds and utterances are often recalled was Barney Murphy. His father - also called Barney was married three times and widowed three

times. When the last woman died, he was as you'd expect, badly annoyed. He got a bit down. It was the springtime and my father and the neighbours rallied round and ploughed and put in the potatoes and corn for him. When the crop was in, my grandfather (Hugh Smart) went to Barney and said, "Now we know you've had a hard blow, but your crop is in and you're as far ahead as the rest of us. You'll have to pull yourself together. You know you've had three good women and they've all brought a bit with them." "Houl' on one minute," replied auld Barney, "I'll tell you this. When you marry them, and feed them, and bury them, there's very little out of them!"

### BARNEY MURPHY JUNIOR



**Barney Murphy Jnr**

#### "Lave her be":

One wet night about 1957 or '58 - it was at a time when the IRA were blowing up things here and there around the country - my brother Hugh and I were coming home in the van from a Farmers' Union meeting when we overtook Barney Murphy walking out on the Blackbridge Road. I think he was coming from Canavan's. We stopped to give him a lift and he got in but, as it was wet and dark and we had our collars turned up and spoke with what we hoped was a bit of a brogue, he didn't recognise us. When he was in and we set off he said, "You's men are not from around here." We said, "No. We're from Forkhill. We're IRA men. We're down here to do a job. We hear there's a wee Orange Hall about here. We've come to blow it up." Barney said, "For God's sake men, lave her be! You's'll blow her up and we'll have to pay for the building of her again!"

#### "One had to draw the line somewhere!"

On one occasion when drinking with a group of associates in William Bell's in Banbridge, Barney passed out. This was not unusual with Barney so nobody passed much remark. When he came round the friends were still drinking.

They said "God, Barney, we thought you were dead!"

"In that case," said Barney "I hope you had the decency to send for the priest,"

"Oh we did" they said, "we sent to Loughbrickland for Dean McPolin." (Barney's Parish Priest)

"That was good of yours." Said Barney.

"But he wasn't in", they said.

"What did you do then?" asked Barney.

"We sent on to the Fourtowns for Reverend McCausland, the Presbyterian Minister," they said.

"A decent man," said Barney "He'd do the job very well."

"But he wasn't in," they said.

"What did you do then?" asked Barney.

"We sent on to Poyntzpass for the lay-preacher," they said.

"Oh, no, no, no!" said Barney. "One has to draw the line somewhere!"

#### "Western Canada USA"

Barney's brother Eugene emigrated to Canada. For some reason, Barney called him "Nugene". One night when he accompanied Barney to Canavan's pub, Barney introduced him to the other customers as "...my brother Nugene back home from Western Canada USA".

On one occasion, members of the Smyth family brought Barney home in a drunken state. When they attempted to take his boots off, they were experiencing some difficulty. Barney revived sufficiently to remark, "Well, they got them off all right on Monday night!"

Barney occasionally went to Warrenpoint and liked to go across on the ferry to Omeath where the pubs were open on Sundays. On the return journey of one of those outings, a squall blew up. The boat began to sway quite violently. A lady on board started to panic and sob, saying, "The boat is going to sink!"

Barney consoled her by saying, "Missis, you don't have anything to worry about, sure you don't own the boat!"

#### THE NIGHT OF THE BIG WIND

Barney Conlon lived beside Geordie Anderson's and it was a great meeting place years ago. I mind him telling us one night about a thing that happened on 'The Night of the Big Wind' (6<sup>th</sup> January, 1839). He told us there was a man that lived in Drumsallagh and when the storm arose it started to strip the thatch off the roof. He was out on a ladder of some sort trying to keep the thatch on and his wife was helping him. She was a very religious woman and she handed him up a bottle of holy water to throw over the thatch. As he did it a big gust of wind blew a big blad of thatch off. He

said to his wife, "To hell with that! Hand me up the harrow!"

#### A FORTOWNS FUNERAL

When an old woman who lived on the Fourtowns School Road died, there was a great wake. It lasted for near 'a week. They were a bit rough of themselves. The remains were supposed to be brought to Loughbrickland one day but didn't turn up. There was still plenty of drink so they decided to put off the funeral for another day. The minister came to the house to see why the remains hadn't turned up, but the son said, "There's plenty to ate and drink. We'll keep her another day." The minister left, saying that they were "worse than the red Indians!"

Anyway at last the following day, the remains were loaded on a horse and cart – they didn't bother with a hearse – and followed by a few other neighbours and friends in carts and traps, they started off for Loughbrickland. They were way behind time starting so they went towards the Bann Road but turned up a loanin' that was a short-cut over the hill up past where Dessie Smyth built the house – it takes you out at Patsy Smyth's corner.



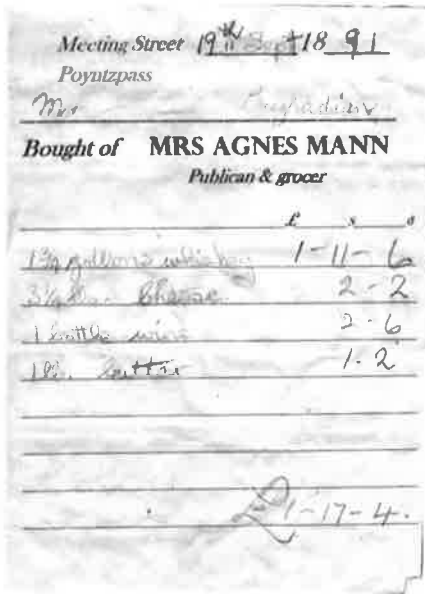
"You should never take a funeral a short cut!"

When they had gone a good bit up the loanin', a man came running up to the son and said, "Yous are doin' a desperat unlucky thing, men. You know you should never take a funeral by a short-cut." So after a debate, it was decided to go back down the loanin' again and they set about turning the carts. No sooner had they begun than another man spoke up, "Do yiz know nothing at all? Do yous not know, there's no more unlucky thing in the world you could do than turn a funeral!" So they were in a great dilemma! What was to be done? Eventually it was decided to reverse all the horses and carts and traps back down the loanin'. This proved to be a long and hard job but, at long last, all hands made it back down the road and once more set out for Loughbrickland.

When they arrived in Loughbrickland it was two or three hours after the appointed time. The minister had

got fed up and gone home for his tea and so had the sexton and the gate was locked. They debated what to do. Some wanted to take her home again but the son said, "No! Throw her up on the wall, we'll bury her ourselves," So they lifted the coffin over the wall into the graveyard and buried the old mother themselves.

They had kept a ten shilling note to pay the sexton, so instead they then adjourned with the ten shilling note to McClory's pub and had a great evening.



The bill from the establishment of Mrs. Agnes Mann, spirit grocer, Poyntzpass, dated 1891 for the Fourtowns wake.

### SLEITH'S

Up the hill a wee bit from our place on the opposite side of the road, there was people called Sleith lived. They were a very rough and ready sort of people. At one time there was only the old woman and one son. He was a bit of a lazy sort of a fellow but big and awkward of himself and he got into some kind of trouble over sheep or was accused of stealing sheep or something like that. Anyway he had to leave quick and he was away out of the country for a year or two. Where he went nobody knew.

Anyway one night late he come back. The old mother was sitting at the fire. She had the door locked. He put his shoulder to the door and he knocked door, door cheeks and all into the kitchen. The old woman never moved from the fire or passed any remarks. "I'm home, ma," he said. "I see that son," she replied, and that was all there was about it.



Lewis Smart



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