

The Great Famine

THE FAMINE YEARS

Autumn of 1845: First failure of potato crop – some areas escaped the blight. Numbers entering workhouses no greater than normal.

Winter of 1845-1846: Conservatives in power – Indian Corn purchased and distributed – some relief works set up – workhouses able to cope with any increase in numbers entering the workhouses..

Autumn of 1846: Second failure of potato crop – much more widespread. Whigs now in power – policy of laissez faire. Relief was to be limited to public works. Thousands flocked to public works schemes.

Winter of 1846-1847: Very severe winter – snow and gales in February - starvation and fever – great pressure on workhouses – most had to be extended. Temporary Relief Act of Feb. 1847 provided for the establishment of soup kitchens throughout the country.

Winter of 1847-48: Another bad year. Starvation and fever, although not as bad as ‘Black 47’ were still widespread – workhouses were still full of the poor and those with fever. Emigration, which had begun in earlier years, continued and was often encouraged and financed by both landlords and Boards of Guardians. By 1849 the blight was disappearing and sufficient potatoes were becoming available to feed the poor.

Famine Fever

Name of Fever	Causes	Symptoms
Typhus	Transmitted by lice. Enters the body through, scratches, the eyes and inhalation.	High temperatures, prostration, mental confusion and a rash. If the person is not going to recover, he or she will die, usually from heart failure, after a fortnight.
Relapsing Fever	Again transmitted by lice, through the skin only.	High temperatures, aches and pains, nausea, vomiting, nose bleeding and jaundice. The fever ends after five or six days attended by profuse sweating and exhaustion. Symptoms return again after about a week and several such relapses will occur before the disease runs its course.
Dysentery (Bloody Flux)	Eating of raw food particularly uncooked maize. Also eating of contaminated soup.	Inflammation of the bowels, diarrhoea, passing of blood, nausea, aching pains and shivering.
Dropsy (Hunger Oedema)	Starvation	Swelling of internal organs. Whole body becomes bloated before the person dies.

During the famine, dysentery was popularly known as ‘the disorder’ and fever as ‘the sickness’. However, the term fever as used in contemporary sources during the famine is often difficult to interpret accurately. In short when we see the word fever it could be any of the above, including dysentery. However, note that dropsy, caused by starvation, was only likely to occur in very severely hit areas such as Skibbereen in Co. Cork.

The thinking behind the Irish Poor Law System

I wish to see the poorhouse looked to with Dread by our Labouring classes and the reproach for being an inmate of it extend downward from father to son: let the Poor see and feel that their Parish, although it will not allow them to perish through absolute want, is yet the hardest taskmaster, the closest paymaster and the most unkind friend they can apply to.

These are the words of George Nicholls written in 1822 and quoted in Patrick Durnin, *The Workhouse and the Famine In Derry*, Guildhall Press, Derry, 2001 p. 68. Nicholls was responsible for producing a report in 1837 which was instrumental in shaping policy on the Poor Law in Ireland. Durnin’s book, chapter 4, pp. 68-87, describes everyday life in the workhouse at that time.

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FAMINE IN MAGHERAFELT POOR LAW UNION

LETTERS:

Rev. John P. Hewitt Rector of Moneymore writing to W. Stanley on 3rd February 1847.

‘The distress is increasing every day Although such fearful distress does not prevail as in other places, yet the destitution is great and our need urgent The soup kitchen dispenses 100 gallons of soup daily and we supply 228 families, consisting of upwards of 1100 individuals. The workhouse at Magherafelt has more than it was constructed to receive.’

Rev. J. Radcliff writing in the Castledawson Presbyterian Church Session Minute Book on 15th September 1848.

‘In the year 1846 occurred the greatest failure of the potato crop. For a number of years previous there had been evident symptoms of failure.... There ensued a winter of the direst calamity. Hunger was visible in its [faintest?] aspects. The people, suddenly changed in their food from potatoes to the Indian meal, were visited with a most wasting dysentery. To meet these things were established Relief Committees. These were composed of the resident magistracy, the clergy of the three denominations, Episcopalians, Roman Catholic and Presbyterian... It was a wearisome thing to spend days after days at these Relief Committees and to come into contact with the hideous picture of misery which was then presented. It was more sorrowful still to look out and see the hungry look of the multitudes and to mark that all joy seemed to disappear from the human face.

....The winter which succeeded that of 1847 was a dreadful one of fever. From January 1847 until January 1848 there died out of this congregation fifty-two persons, one every week. On two separate occasions I recorded three funerals meeting in the graveyard at the same time. On two other occasions I saw two coffins brought in together in the same cart. I hope God in his providence will spare the country from such a disaster in future and myself from ever witnessing anything similar.’

The source of these two extracts is a book by Christine Kinealy & Trevor Parkhill eds. *The Famine in Ulster: the regional impact*, Ulster Historical Foundation (Belfast, 1997), pp. 156-157.

This is a copy of a letter from Rt. Hon. George Robert Dawson, Castledawson, Co. Londonderry to Sir Thomas F. Freemantle, Chairman of the Board of Customs, London, 17 January 1847, describing the distress in south Derry in the winter of 1846-47.

Castledawson,
Sunday, 17th January, 1847

My Dear Freemantle,

I really have not had heart to write to you before for I had nothing to communicate except the heart rending scenes of misery which I daily witness. I wish I had never come here, if I had known what I was to encounter in this hitherto happy district, I should have spared myself the pain of witnessing a misery, which, with every feeling of compassion, and every expenditure within my means, I can do no more than most inadequately and feebly relieve. I can think of nothing else than the wretched condition of this wretched people. We are comparatively well off in this neighbourhood, there is no want of food, but it is at such a price, as to make it totally impossible for a poor man to support his family with the wages he receives. I do not exaggerate when I tell you that from the moment I open my hall door in the morning until dark, I have a crowd of women and children crying out for something to save them from starving. The men, except the old and infirm stay away, and show the greatest patience and resignation.

I have been obliged to turn my kitchen into a Bakery and Soup shop to enable me to feed the miserable children and mothers that cannot be sent away empty. So great is their distress that they actually faint on getting food into their stomachs. The only reply to my question of what do you want, is, I want something to eat, is so simple, so universal, that it tells its own tale and neither rags nor sickness nor worn out faces or emaciated limbs can make their situation more truly pitiable than these few words. The gentry, the shopkeepers, the clergy are making every effort in their power to relieve the people, by subscriptions, and incessant attention, but what can be done when thousands, are daily, applying for one

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meal a day. We are also visited by hordes of wandering poor who come from the mountains, or other districts less favoured by a resident gentry, and worst of all, Death, is dealing severely and consigning many to an untimely tomb. This week six or seven of the old and infirm have died in my little village, not from want of food, but from the consequences of privation and the total change which has taken place in the habits of the people.

Yours truly,
George Dawson

Source: PRONI Education Pack on *The Famine*, published in 1970s.

Summary of numbers admitted to Magherafelt Workhouse 1845-1848

Day	Month	Year	Admissions	Rejections	Total wishing to be admitted	% of Total applicants rejected	Total no. of persons in the workhouse	Those with fever in the workhouse	% with fever
27	Feb.	1845	4		4	0%	253		0%
1	May	1845	2		2	0%	213		0%
22	June	1845	5		5	0%	197		0%
9	Oct.	1845	2		2	0%	176		0%
6	Nov.	1845	6		6	0%	174		0%
13	Nov.	1845	1		1	0%	181		0%
Figures not available at the moment*									
1	July	1847	2		2	0%	610	41	7%
8	July	1847	40		40	0%	607	40	7%
15	July	1847	18		18	0%	613	31	5%
27	July	1847	40		40	0%	638	42	7%
5	Aug.	1847	40		40	0%	661	41	6%
12	Aug.	1847	31		31	0%	639	38	6%
19	Aug.	1847	40		40	0%	623	57	9%
26	Aug.	1847	40		40	0%	602	99	16%
2	Sept.	1847	46		46	0%	605	136	22%
9	Sept.	1847	70	9	79	11%	640	128	20%
23	Sept.	1847	65	20	85	24%	713	141	20%
30	Sept.	1847	51		51	0%	764	167	22%
7	Oct.	1847	22	10	32	31%	784	130	17%
14	Oct.	1847	50	9	59	15%	806	145	18%
21	Oct.	1847	39	5	44	11%	842	139	17%
28	Oct.	1847	17	10	27	37%	860	161	19%
4	Nov.	1847	53	8	61	13%	865	111	13%
11	Nov.	1847	36	10	46	22%	902	162	18%
18	Nov.	1847	14	15	29	52%	909	144	16%
25	Nov.	1847	38	37	75	49%	878	122	14%
2	Dec.	1847	24	36	60	60%	899	136	15%
9	Dec.	1847	24	70	94	74%	918	147	16%
16	Dec.	1847	13	28	41	68%	941	156	17%
23	Dec.	1847	91	32	123	26%	923	172	19%
30	Dec.	1847	89	23	112	21%	903	171	19%
6	Jan.	1848	42	22	64	34%	908	171	19%
13	Jan.	1848	71		71	0%	N/A	N/A	
20	Jan.	1848	77	22	99	22%	904	176	19%
27	Jan.	1848	92	21	113	19%	914	183	20%
3	Feb.	1848	103	11	114	10%	921	154	17%
10	Feb.	1848	75	8	83	10%	940	155	16%

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17	Feb.	1848	108		108	0%	943	156	17%
24	Feb.	1848	57	8	65	12%	946	145	15%
2	Mar.	1848	57	7	64	11%	960	151	16%
9	Mar.	1848	64	4	68	6%	969	159	16%
16	Mar.	1848	71	4	75	5%	940	153	16%
23	Mar.	1848	55		55	0%	968	160	17%
30	Mar.	1848	55		55	0%	1,002	161	16%
6	April	1848	11		11	0%	995	159	16%
13	April	1848	19		19	0%	N/A	N/A	
20	April	1848	28		28	0%	935	107	11%
27	April	1848	23		23	0%	882	97	11%
4	May	1848	33		33	0%	880	100	11%
11	May	1848	49		49	0%	838	95	11%
18	May	1848	60		60	0%	829	93	11%
25	May	1848	59		59	0%	832	91	11%
1	June	1848	54		54	0%	822	91	11%
8	June	1848	84		84	0%	N/A	N/A	
18	June	1848	52		52	0%	881	80	9%
22	June	1848	54		54	0%	901	73	8%
29	June	1848	35		35	0%	888	63	7%
6	July	1848	24	56	80	70%	888	63	7%
13	July	1848	21		21	0%	877	70	8%
20	July	1848	27		27	0%	843	55	7%
27	July	1848	40		40	0%	857	53	6%
3	Aug.	1848	18		18	0%	836	48	6%
10	Aug.	1848	14		14	0%	797	51	6%
17	Aug.	1848	16		16	0%	741	51	7%
Totals July 47/Aug. 48			2641	485	3126	16%	45982	6221	14%

Source: Minute Books of Magherafelt Board of Guardians 1847-1848 (PRONI Ref. B. G. XXIII/A/1-2)

*I think there are figures available for the period between 1845 and 1847. I do not have them!

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FAMINE IN BALLYMENA POOR LAW UNION

LETTERS:

These extracts come from letters [PRONI: T1289/19] by George Joy, agent of the Mount Cashell estate at Galgorm. The townlands on the estate were scattered throughout the Ballymena area.

Letter of 28th January 1846 to Earl Mount Cashell.

‘Although it is now so near to the 1st May I regret to say that there is still a considerable portion of the rents unpaid and I fear that many of the tenants will not only be unable to pay up a year’s rent, but even half a year; and some I am sure will require to be indulged until next year’s harvest.

The failure of the potato crop has been a sad calamity on the poor tenants who are now obliged to purchase oatmeal at an extravagant price, as also their seed potatoes.’

Letter of 2nd May 1846 to Earl Mount Cashell.

‘.... I must say that the tenants have made extraordinary exertions to come forward with their money considering the calamity in the potato crop and the distressed situation in which the linen trade now is as regards the poor weaver.’

Letter of 13th January 1847 to Earl Mount Cashell.

‘I do not see how it will be possible for the major part of the tenants to pay any rent at May and unless assistance be afforded to small holders of land to purchase seed and get in crops the consequences next year will be awful.

Although there has been no actual death from starvation as yet there is nothing but distress and destitution in the country.’

Letter of 21st July 1847 to William Hutchinson agent of the Mount Cashell estate in County Cork.

‘I had hoped to have been enabled to get in some portion of the large arrear due upon the estateI can hold out no hope or expectation of getting in any rents before October The country is in fact pauperised, and farmers who a few years ago were in comfortable circumstances are now many of them in distress.’

As the final letter shows, it would appear that George Joy’s sympathetic attitude towards the tenants on the Galgorm estate cost him his job. Incidentally, as well as being land agent of Lord Mount Cashell’s estate in Co. Antrim, George Joy was a landlord in his own right and had properties in counties Antrim and Wicklow.

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Letter of 24th August 1847 from George Joy, London to Earl Mount Cashell, Moore Park.

I have just received your lordship's letter of the 19th informing me of your having appointed Mr. Cleverly ? as your agent in my stead for your county Antrim estates and wishing me to hand over to him all leases, maps, papers etc. which are in my possession belonging to your lordship.

This shall be done with as little delay as possible, and although I had fixed on leaving this for Ostend the day after tomorrow, I shall postpone for the present my visit to the continent and return to Ireland in the course of a few days in order to carry your lordship's wishes into effect without delay and enable Mr. Clunty to commence his duties as soon as possible.

Although I am well satisfied to be relieved of an agency the very responsible duties of which I have filled to the best of my abilities not only for your lordship's advantage but also for that of your tenants for upwards of 38 years, and to be permitted to enjoy for the remainder of my life my otium cum dignitate - yet I must confess that I would have expected after such a lengthened period to receive your rather less unkind and less abrupt and unfriendly communication from your lordship in announcing my removal. As a matter of course I now consider the power of attorney to receive rents etc. Cancelled and my duties as agent at an end.

I am etc.

Note that the Galgorm estate was bankrupt by 1850 and was sold under the Encumbered Estates legislation of 1849.

What effect had the famine on the population of Ballymena and Magherafelt Poor Law Unions?

The table below will show you how the population changed between 1841 and 1851 in each of the DEDs in each Union.

Overall the population of Magherafelt Union fell by 20% whereas it only fell by 3% in the Ballymena Union. The earlier information in this paper may provide some clues as to why this was the case. A look at the Ordnance Survey Memoirs for the two areas may provide further clues. You will find the latter information at the [Sources](#) link in the top menu of this website. The *Ordnance Survey Memoirs* link is in the *Sources: Other Records* webpage.

Ballymena Poor Law Union

Magherafelt Poor Law Union

Electoral Division	Population 1841	Population 1851	% Change	Inhabited Houses 1841	Inhabited Houses 1851	% Change 1841 to 1851		Electoral Division	Population 1841	Population 1851	% Change	Inhabited Houses 1841	Inhabited Houses 1851	% Change 1841 to 1851
Ballyconnelly	2,415	2,268	-6%	408	385	-6%		Bancran	2,753	2,300	-16%	512	441	-14%
Ballymena	6,957	7,716	11%	1,173	1,281	9%		Bellaghy	5,294	4,356	-18%	905	791	-13%
Ballyscullion	3,654	3,445	-6%	636	583	-8%		Brackaghslievegallion	2,304	1,734	-25%	376	314	-16%
Broughshane	4,353	4,098	-6%	714	731	2%		Carnamoney	2,625	2,086	-21%	459	396	-14%
Clogh	2,951	2,999	2%	529	504	-5%		Castledawson	5,366	5,077	-5%	905	848	-6%
Cloghogue	3,119	3,214	3%	506	521	3%		Clady	4,035	3,097	-23%	730	572	-22%
Drumanaway	2,730	2,586	-5%	461	438	-5%		Desertmartin	3,452	2,538	-26%	613	489	-20%
Dundermot	1,179	1,136	-4%	201	190	-5%		Draperstown	2,955	2,634	-11%	510	471	-8%
Dunminning	2,580	2,452	-5%	441	431	-2%		Gulladuff	3,234	2,466	-24%	595	470	-21%
Galgorm	5,363	5,143	-4%	960	926	-4%		Iniscarn	2,266	1,665	-27%	373	302	-19%
Glenbuck	2,184	2,019	-8%	398	346	-13%		Lissan	3,386	2,784	-18%	611	521	-15%
Glenavill	1,845	1,961	6%	336	348	4%		Maghera	4,181	3,586	-14%	724	635	-12%
Glenwhirry	1,548	1,197	-23%	257	215	-16%		Magherafelt	4,587	4,044	-12%	749	622	-17%
Kells	5,760	5,521	-4%	998	951	-5%		Moneyhaw	1,998	1,527	-24%	324	249	-23%
Kirkcubbin	3,296	3,152	-4%	578	540	-7%		Moneymore	2,868	2,144	-25%	453	363	-20%
Lisnagarran	3,623	3,430	-5%	594	568	-4%		Rocktown	3,866	2,931	-24%	659	511	-22%
Longmore	1,713	1,700	-1%	308	308	0%		Salterstown	2,933	2,137	-27%	496	376	-24%
Newtown Crommelin	1,729	1,716	-1%	295	308	4%		Springhill	2,589	1,939	-25%	434	349	-20%
Portlengone	4,089	3,921	-4%	718	678	-6%		Swatragh	3,595	2,866	-20%	638	517	-19%
Slemish	2,794	2,497	-11%	497	470	-5%		The Loop	3,031	2,188	-28%	538	394	-27%
Toome	2,607	2,398	-8%	410	413	1%		The Sixtowns	1,149	1,058	-8%	207	195	-6%
								Tobermore	3,246	2,541	-22%	575	474	-18%
								Tullykeeran	3,041	2,393	-21%	536	468	-13%
Ballymena Union	74,109	71,552	-3%	12,706	12,325	-3%		Magherafelt Union	81,027	64,506	-20%	13,993	11,517	-18%
Co. Antrim*	354,153	352,264	-1%	59,365	58,281	-2%		Co. Londonderry	222,174	191,868	-14%	38,652	33,339	-14%
Ulster	2,386,373	2,011,880	-16%	414,536	351,873	-15%		Ulster	2,386,373	2,011,880	-16%	414,536	351,873	-15%
Ireland	8,175,124	6,552,385	-20%	1,328,839	1,046,223	-21%		Ireland	8,175,124	6,552,385	-20%	1,328,839	1,046,223	-21%

* These figures are affected by the fact that the city of Belfast is part of Co. Antrim.