

PRE-FAMINE LIVING CONDITIONS OF PEOPLE IN SKIBBEREEN

By Terri Carney

The poor lived in so-called cabins, classed as 4th class houses in the 1841 census. These were mud or rough stone built with just one room, perhaps no windows or chimney. At about 12 x 15 feet wide and variety of lengths, these would have housed a whole family (sometimes 2!) perhaps of 8-10 people and a pig. Skibbereen town was described as being full of these - especially Bridgetown, the place where Skibbereen Heritage Centre now is. Over 40% of the local population lived like this.

The cabin dwellers were the people that 'disappeared'. I did a study of a local area, called Lough Hyne, where there was a decline of 77% in 4th class houses between 1841-51.

The rents were high and those who could afford it were paying the most - a Devon Commission report in Skibbereen just before the Famine stated that a labourer (cottier, cabin dweller) was paying 40 schillings rent to a tenant farmer, who was paying 32 schillings to a middleman who paid just 3 schillings to the landlord.

RELIEF WORKS IN SKIBBEREEN

On the 30th of September 1846, between 800-1000 men working on road works in Caheragh (where my mother is from) marched into the town of Skibbereen in desperation. They were owed money for their work which hadn't been paid and they could not buy food from the Commissariat as it was before the date decreed by the government for its release. In addition, there was a rumour that the work was to be discontinued and the desperate men marched into the town of Skibbereen with their picks and shovels (which glittered in the 'blazing sun').^[1] The town of Skibbereen closed down, its shutters were put down and the streets cleared in anticipation of a riot.

The Caheragh workers were met at the entrance to the town by 75 soldiers, the full extent of the military presence in the town at the time (the following week that amount was doubled), with guns primed and loaded. Michael Galwey, Justice of the Peace, had the foresight to calm the situation and food was sold to them from the government store (which was not yet open). The men stayed put for 4 hours altogether and were read the riot act by Mr Galwey but they replied that they 'had better be shot than not'. Finally they dispersed.

25 days later, Denis McKennedy working on these same works collapsed and died on the side of the road while working. Because he was one of the first deaths of the Famine, an inquest was carried out into his death which found that 'died of starvation, owing to the gross negligence of the Board of Works'. He was owed 2 weeks wages because the money had been sent to the wrong pay clerk. All that was found in his stomach and small intestines was a portion of raw, undigested cabbage.

Such events happened all over Ireland.

Another relief works, at Lough Hyne, a local lake, involved building a retaining wall at one part of the lake. This was carried out in the early months of 1847, when there was snow and ice and it was bitterly cold, and the workers would have had to immerse themselves in the water to carry out the work. Starvation exacerbates the effects of cold, so these poor workers would really have suffered carrying out this work, in very poor clothing.

MEDIA REPORTING OF THE FAMINE IN SKIBBEREEN

Skibbereen came to become synonymous with the Famine, not only because it was very badly affected, but that it was reported upon. A letter from a Cork Magistrate, Nicholas Cummins, to the Duke of Wellington was published in 'The Times' on Christmas Eve 1846 describing what he had seen in Skibbereen and this had a profound effect. In February 1847, James Mahony of the 'Illustrated London News' came and did reports on Skibbereen and district and sketched what he saw as well as describing what he witnessed. These are among the few images of the Great Famine that we have. (lots of text available on these if you want it, very harrowing descriptions)

Other visitors came to Skibbereen then as it became known as the 'epicentre of horror' and we have the written accounts of Elihu Burritt (an American philanthropist) and the Two Young Gentlemen from Oxford which is a great story of 2 young students, Lord Dufferin and GS Boyle coming to Skibb for 4 days. Endangering their lives, they dispensed bread and travelled around the area and went back and published 'Journey from Oxford' and all proceeds came to Skibb. But Dufferin also made an anonymous contribution of £1000 (Queen Victoria gave £2500) and he only admitted that it came from him many years later when he was an old man.

GOVERNMENT SOUP KITCHENS SET UP IN 1847 AND THE NEW TEMPORARY RELIEF OF THE POOR ACT

The country ran out of food in 1846-7 and reports of starvation were going global, pressure mounted on the government to take action and the relief works wound down and soup kitchens opened. They were a great success and fed up to 3 million in summer 1847.

The government used 'Soyers Soup' recipe - approx. only 10% of calorific requirements for an adult for a day, barely kept people alive. Skibbereen Committee had set up a soup kitchen months before, in November 1846.

Local charity set it up and dispensed soup from steam mill building, just opposite heritage centre today. Up to 9,000 people fed per day. Horrific 3rd party descriptions of the people going for soup (*the narrow define of the dispensary bar was choked with young and old of both sexes, struggling forward with their rusty tin and iron vessels for soup, some them upon all fours, like famished beasts*).

Soup was distributed by local Clergymen and Landlords from their houses too in advance of the official Soup Kitchen Act as in many other parts of the badly affected areas.

Dr Dan Donovan refused to use the Soyer's Soup recipe in the Skibb soup kitchen as he said that it was 'injurious' to people. Quakers soup recipe far, far superior.

SKIBBEREEN WORKHOUSE

The records of Skibbereen workhouse were destroyed by fire when it was burnt in the 1920s so few records remain. There are horrific third party accounts of the conditions which include terrible overcrowding - it's calculated that each person had 2 square feet of space in 1847 which, of course, facilitated the spread of disease.

BURYING THE DEAD

There are several accounts of houses just being thrown in on the people and being left as makeshift graves. Also horrific accounts of people going to the watch-house at Chapel Lane burial ground to die as no one left to bury them, they just went there to wait to die.

Also the 'pits' at Abbeystrowy burial ground - between 8,000-10,000 buried there (2000 in Skibbereen today) in these large holes in the ground which were left open, with layers of sawdust thrown in on the bodies, until each was filled and the next one opened. Story relating to the 'pits' on Tom Guerin, the boy who was buried alive and he is very well remember locally - my grandmother knew him.

Tom 'died' in 1848 when he was just 3 years old. He was taken to the Abbeystrowry burial pits on the dead-cart and, the story goes, as he was being put into the pits he was hit by a shovel which caused him to groan and it was realised that he was alive. His legs were damaged in by the shovel and, in his own words, he was a 'cripple' thereafter. Post Famine conditions in Skibbereen were not much better than during the Famine itself and poor Tom had a hard time making a living but he capitalised on the fact that he was the man 'risen from the dead'. He used to travel around the area in summertime begging as the 'man who had risen from the dead' announcing himself with

'I'm the poet, I'm the genius' while in winter, he used to go into the workhouse.

Around 1898, he applied to the Guardians of the Workhouse asking them to buy him a new pair of shoes and he did so with a poem, and we still have some of its words ...

- *I rose from the dead in the year '48*

When a grave at the Abbey had near been my fate;

Since then for subsistence, I have done all my best

Though one foot points eastwards and the other points west.

I roam o'er the world admiring each scene,

And a tax on the ratepayers I never have been.

I only appeal to you now for a pair

Of brogues, and I'll vanish again into air.

- He got the boots.

EVICTIONS IN SKIBBEREEN

Post the Gregory Clause in 1847, evictions were common in this area as in many others. Lots of stories relating to evictions but one from Lough Hyne that is particularly poignant as follows:

- Reported by Jeremiah O'Callaghan of the 'Cork Examiner' newspaper who extensively covered the Famine. This is in Lough Hyne near Skibbereen.

He visited a site of an eviction that had taken place 2 days before. The landlord's agent had stripped the thatch off the roof of Widow Geaney and her seven children, all of whom were in fever. He promised her a ticket to the workhouse but once she and her family were on the side of the road, he reneged on his promise. She followed him for about a mile pleading with him to help her but then she collapsed on the side of the road and didn't have the strength to get back to her family. There the reporter found her 2 days later and when he went to check that she was still breathing, he found an infant dying by her side. O'Callaghan went and got some sticks of furniture and created a 'sort of shed' over her so that she would have some shelter and there they died, her and the infant, 'under the broad canopy of heaven'. The rest of the family were down at the site of the eviction, all in fever, in the 'deserted village'.