

TimesPast

The forgotten graves of Cootehill



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'It is the duty of my office, firmly, calmly, and perseveringly, to advocate the cause of my poor, poor, people; and I will do so.' These were the words of Rev. Samuel Roberts, Curate of Kill, Cootehill, in 1848.

In 2007, I was asked to give a talk on Cootehill Workhouse, a subject to make the hairs stand up on the back of your neck. Seven years later, I gave another talk on Cootehill and the Great Famine. There were few places about Cavan which were as badly affected by famine as Cootehill. As I prepared my piece, I would find myself on days off work sifting through old and sometimes dusty documents which exposed the whole terrible story. In my final preparations, I decided to visit the old burial ground at the back of the former workhouse site. Trying to find access to the site was a bit precarious at the time and luckily a local farmer granted me permission to walk across a field. A climb over a ditch later and I came face to face with what was approximately a quarter of an acre.

Like most workhouses, the burial ground had no headstones, apart from a small monument of a Celtic cross and plaque. The words on the plaque read: 'In memory of The Large Unknown Numbers of People Buried Here. 1842-1902. May They Rest In Peace.'

A few weeks ago, Joe Finnegan of the 'Joe Finnegan Show' got in touch with me to say that the burial ground at Cootehill workhouse had been discussed on the show. He explained that people who had travelled to Cootehill were concerned that there was no public access to the graveyard. Sadly, I discovered that there are many people in 2016 who do not even realise that this graveyard exists. A proportion of the men, women and children buried within its clay had suffered and died during the famine.

Famine Days

The Great Famine 1845-1852 was one of the worst periods in Ireland's history. In the Parish of Drumgoon, Fr. Peter Curran noted the 'deplorable and melancholy condition' of 3,000 people who had received no support. The ad hoc relief committee approached nine of the parish's absentee Landlords, six of whom 'had only subscribed a paltry £28'. The other half of the fund, totalling £78 10 s 6d was collected from local parishioners. When applying for official approval to set-up a committee, Fr. Curran had to go through John Young MP. D

ue to all the red-tape nonsense involved, it took almost a month for



The famine memorial in Cootehill.

them to get the go ahead before they could obtain vital help. Tullygarvey was said to have been the worst organised Barony when it came to setting-up relief committees. It ended up with seven sub-committees. Relief works included road-making, wall-building and stone-breaking. In return for a day's work the men got paltry rations. In August 1846, Relief Committees ceased temporarily so as to allow workers to help out with the autumn harvest. Tragically, almost the entire 1846 potato crop was decimated by blight. Those too weak through starvation would try to get into the workhouse. Quite often they were turned away because of over-crowding and consequently they died by the roadside or in farm sheds where they sought shelter. Cootehill workhouse had accommodation for 800 persons, a supply far exceeded by demand during the famine. Auxiliary houses had to be opened to manage the extra load. A fever hospital was built and opened at Lisnasaran in 1847, to cope with the ill who had contracted disease such as typhoid fever.

Hunger pains

Not everyone died inside the walls of the workhouse. In the 1930s, Mary Kettle of Cohaw, recalled a story about her grandfather during the famine. She told the story as follows: 'My Grandfather was going with a cow to the fair of Cootehill, and he saw a girl standing up against a gate that was along the road. The cow moved over to the gate and when my grandfather went over to drive the cow away from it, he got a terrible

shock when he found that the girl was dead... She died from hunger and cold. Her clothes were stiff with the frost.'

Another story was told about a boy near Drumgoon Bridge. It's an account that emphasises what real hunger is all about. The young lad had been hired out to a well-to-do farmer near Drumgoon Bridge. One day, at the dinner table the woman of the house placed a feed of turnips in front of the gasún. He turned his nose up at the food and refused to eat it. A short while later, he upped-sticks and ran away. About six months later, the woman of the house was looking out the window when she spotted the young boy back at the house. Only this time, he was on top of the dung heap, dressed in rags as he greedily ate turnip peels that had been thrown out.

Many of these stories can be read at www.duchas.ie or can be found in the folklore collection at UCD. The stories mentioned above were only the tip of the iceberg. Letters still survive from clergy of the various denominations who describe the full horror of what happened to individual families and their children in the Cootehill area. Of course, it was a terrible event which hit other parts of Cavan and the country at large.

Canon O'Dowd

During the 1990s, the late and highly respected Canon Desmond O'Dowd made an important effort to hold an annual Blessing of the Graves ceremony at the Workhouse burial ground. A farmer, had at that time granted access to the graveyard

through his property. The Anglo-Celt recorded the community's appreciation of the farmer, Mr Tommy Lynch who also had gone to the trouble of keeping the burial site tidy. However, not everybody was physically able to climb-over the fences, though they wanted to be there.

In 2007, as I walked away from what was essentially a mass grave, I wondered about the dead interred there. They were people of various backgrounds and faith traditions who in life were segregated from

this world, and now they found themselves separated from visitation in death.

And, on the subject of famine, Cootehill once had a strong Quaker settlement. Today, in history we recall them for their works of charity during the Great Hunger. But, in a strange twist of irony, the Quaker cemetery too lies abandoned to the elements. Both sites have a shared historical link that's worthy of recognition. Perhaps, one-day in the future both heritage sites might be made more accessible to the visitor.



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At the athletes coaching course organised by Eamonn Harvey, Ulster Schools Coach, at Cavan Vocational School in November 1990, were the coaches who gave talks on training. Front (from left): Ben O'Donnell (Long Jump); Joe Doonan (National Middle Distance Coach) and Danny McDaid, well-known International Cross Country competitor; back, Hugo Duggan, former Long Jump Champion; Eamonn Harvey, Ulster Schools Coach, who gave talks on the Shot Putt and Paddy Donoghue, a member of the NIAAA and BLE Coaching Panel, who covered the sprint events.