

## The Famine: Lord Londonderry found wanting?

### The Great Hunger

Newtownards did not suffer grievously when the potato crop failed in 1846-7. Its economy was plural (cotton weaving did much to help see the town through), and though the potato was important, local farmers also grew wheat, oats and barley, avoiding the monoculture that proved so disastrous in the west of Ireland.

However the crisis did not leave Newtownards untouched. Admissions to the workhouse more than doubled between October 1846 and January 1847, and by July they had doubled again to 426. (They were not to subside to normal levels until April 1848.) On January 10th, 1847, John Andrews wrote to Lord Londonderry, then living at Wynyard in County Durham, that:

Matters, I lament to say, are getting daily worse. The importation of food, though considerable, does not seem to satisfy demands or prevent the progressive advance of price, and the sufferings of the poor are considerably increasing... Families who have no head to work for them are much distressed. Many such exist everywhere and they are too numerous in Newtownards. After various projects, visiting committees have been appointed and on Tuesday next something will be decided upon, most probably a soup kitchen. The want of potatoes causes an immense consumption of grain by the farmers, which diminishes the quantity available for the market and I regret to say diminishes the resources available for *rent* which I fear will be deficient at May to a larger extent than I had ventured to contemplate. We must however do our best.

His next letter, of January 18th, 1847, sounds a note of increasing alarm:

Since last I addressed your lordship the distress of the poor has been fearfully increasing. The condition of even the fully employed labourer can not now be other than one of straits and difficulty; and it is much to be feared that of the small farmer, who is eating out of his produce, and has little to sell, will become very bad long before harvest. Seed corn must be extracted from our stocks. All this now becomes now truly alarming. Thank God we have not here much pressure



from want of employment. If the weaving should fail, I know not what would become of us. In Newtownards a good subscription has been got up and the soup kitchen will speedily be in operation.

The following month he reported that the soup kitchen was:

...much visited. I lament to say the poor and destitute are pressing on the workhouse beyond its powers of reception... The future is veiled from the most penetrating human eye. No doubt very considerable privation is endured by all from the labouring classes down and exertion through many months will yet be necessary.

The Guardians of the Newtownards workhouse were not confident that they were adequately equipped to discharge their obligations to the poor. They voted by 19 votes to 11 that a petition should be submitted to the House of Commons asking for permission to distribute food to those in need without them having to be admitted to the workhouse. They also petitioned for a change in the methods of assessing the Poor Law rate so that all districts, urban and rural, would pay the same. This would mean a reduction of rates for Newtownards.

Andrews resisted both proposals. In the case of the first he believed that outdoor relief would encourage dependency and pauperism. Regarding the second – an equalisation of rates – he believed it would undermine the relationship between what an area levied in rates and what it paid out in relief: ‘the closer responsibility and liability are brought home there will

*‘Binging’ or bedding potatoes, to store them. This practice was routine in the Ards. Potatoes were important but the local economy was mixed, and potato dependency was less commonplace.*