

Linen Weaving in Kilkenny in 18th Century

By Pat Walsh

IN 1756 after his tour of Ireland Bishop Pococke established a linen weaving school at Lintown in Kilkenny. It was richly endowed and instruction was given in Linen weaving and general subjects. Dr. Pococke made a deep study of the linen industry in Buncrana and Dundalk etc. It was generally accepted that the buildings at Lintown were planned by Dr. Pococke and were very advanced in 1763. Louis Cromellin a Huguenot who had put the linen industry in the north on a firm footing was urged to come to Kilkenny as some of the local magnets were anxious to establish a large scale industry in the area. This aroused so much hostility in cross channel and northern circles the project for a large scale industry had to be abandoned, and small scale growing and processing of flax undertaken instead.

The Colles Family, prominent industrialists of this period did much to improve the industry. Many improvements were made and new methods were used in processing flax. It is worthy of note that when a presentation was made to Alderman Barry Colles, a spinning wheel was engraved over the inscription. Robert Stephenson who made a tour of inspection in 1755 reported favourably, on the up to date methods employed by the Colles Family to the Linen Board. In his report, he states that if Mr. Colles were a native of any other country his talents would have been recognised and rewarded. On the upper front of the scabbard of the Civic Sword of Kilkenny are two inscriptions (1) that the Chartered School endowed linen manufacture introduced in 1746; (2) the sword and mace repaired Barry Colles Esq., Mayor 1743.

Finns Leinster Journal 1767-1771 contained many advertisements in linen bleachers. The principal one John Kinsella, John Street who announced that he had acquired a bleaching green lately held by Mr. L. Chappelair, William Shaw, Piltown, Thomas Reynolds, The Wheat Sheaf Inn, Gerald Fitzgerald, Brazen Head Inn, William Treacy, Carlow, Thomas Bibby, Kilkenny, Agent. At this time a report was sent to the linen board that the industry was in a flourishing condition in Kilkenny. The linen weavers in Kilkenny were organised in Unions or associations which the local newspaper of the period reported. That in December 1768 a band of fellows believed to be Journey Men weavers attacked a man calling him a colt. He was a weaver and had infringed the rules of their organisation. Sometime later Anthony Blount, Mayor, then also chief magistrate issued a statement in the City

Hall stating that he had received information that many journey men had quitted their work under the pretext that their bosses employ unlawful men who will not conform to their rules and regulations and Blount states were injurious to the trade and orders them to return to work under pain of court proceedings.

In 1770 there was a slump in the industry and two thirds of the looms were idle. Later an attempt was made to introduce the cotton industry but this was not successful. In 1773 Charles Duffin Inspector General for the Linen Board reported a sharp decline in the linen industry and three years later he reported that there was no linen produced with notice in Kilkenny. At the end of the century it had ceased as an organised industry in the area.

In 1817 Peter Bernard made a tour of the country and Kilkenny. He reported that the amount of flax grown was confined to farmers for their own use. He also stated that excellent crops of flax could be grown if the farmers were given proper instruction and he states that there are three bleach yards in Kilkenny (1) Kinchellas near Kilkenny, (2) Smiths at Smiths Vale, (3) Hamsetts at Greenvale.

About this time however new approaches were being made to establish a linen market in Kilkenny and to provide better facilities for scutching and spinning. An application was made to the Linen Board to establish a scutching mill in Kilkenny. Mr. Lewis C. Kinchella stated that up to date methods should be used, if the industry was to be conducted in a proper manner.

At this period the Presentation Sisters were granted three wheels and six reels by the Linen Board to train girls in the art of weaving and a Committee was formed, which included the Earl of Carrick and the Honourable Thomas Butler, to establish a central school to train workers for the linen trade. A further grant of wheels and other gear was made by the Linen Board and premises in Chapel Lane were placed at their disposal by Dr. Marum, Bishop of Ossory. The weaving school at Chapel lane was very successful. It was open in 1818 and had at one period 300 pupils. The committee managed the sale of the finished article. Peter Bernard attended the opening of the linen market which took place in May 1818.

The local press reported on the trade at this market and in this connection only occasional references are made to Lintown. There was keen competition in this industry and premiums awarded to Mr. Burroughs, Lintown, David Spollen, Castlecomer, William Kelly, Thomastown. Despite all the efforts to put the linen industry on a sound basis the attempt failed and with the growth of the woollen industry and the excellent quality of blankets in Kilkenny which had been recognised by the dealers, the linen industry declined and last centre of instruction Lintown closed in 1839.