

The Birthplace of Father Matt Keefe

Ellen Prendergast

Father Matt Keefe, one of the “Callan Curates”, was born in 1811 in Higginstown. That we know from Canon Carrigan’s *History* and from Father T. J. Clohosey in *Old Kilkenny Review* for 1960. My concern here is to record what I have gleaned about his birthplace and family, mainly from the neighbours in the locality to whom I am very grateful. With their help we have ascertained the precise spot where he was born and spent his youth. The home is still essentially as it was in his lifetime, also the farmland, though all has changed hands since the O’Keefe parents departed sometime after 1850.

Higginstown is about five miles from Kilkenny City in an easterly direction towards Johnswell and Clara. According to Griffith’s *Valuation* compiled in 1850 the Keefe family then owned just over 73 acres with dwelling house and out offices: another house was let by Matthew Keefe to William Dwyer. But in their heyday it is thought they owned up to one hundred and fifty acres if local tradition is reliable. Matthew Keefe’s holding¹ was typical of the substantial farms in the area, comfortable and progressive. It was well laid out, the fields were well-fenced and surrounded the farmhouse which was approached by an avenue extending the length of two average fields, from the Higginstown road. The avenue was lined with thorn hedges and with poplar and lime trees at intervals - only ash trees survive today. The thatched two-storey house stands in a prominent position facing to the east the extensive Clara Plain and bounded to the north by the Johnswell Hills. It forms one side of a square farmyard surrounded by outoffices - haybarn, cornsheds, animal accommodation and dairy. The kitchen door was centrally placed and faced into the yard commanding a view of all the farming activities. To-day, however, this door has been closed and a smaller one replaces it to one side; the main entrance is now porched and is on the other side of the house which was originally the back. An apple orchard extended behind the original house and to the south away from the house where there were two stone-built apple houses to store the fruit. Little remains of this now though the approach to the house is through the now meagre orchard. Most Kilkenny farm houses were surrounded by orchards at that time, fruit growing was an important item in the

economy of mixed farming. Extending to the east was a trackway linking up with an old road which once connected Kilderry with Templemartin.

Matthew seems to have been the fourth child of Matthew Senior and his wife Mary Keating, the others being John baptised 27th June 1805, Brigid 28th December 1806, Jane 7th February 1808. Matthew was born July 1811.² The first school that young Matt attended was a Hedge School built on a patch of land donated by his family. It stood on the far side of the road from the entrance gate to his house. It was a single-roomed house built of stone with a thatched roof and with seats and tables constructed of stone. It survived as a collapsed structure into the 1940's when its stones were used to build a nearby bungalow. When Matt was a schoolboy a teacher from Connacht named Hannon presided there, he was one of the family in the O'Keefe home. Such Hedge Schools were organised and supported by the country people throughout Ireland in the 18th and 19th centuries and it has been said that the education provided there was often superior to that available at higher levels. Dr. P. J. Dowling's book on *The Hedge Schools of Ireland* published in 1935 does not notice the little school at Higginstown but it describes similar schools and their curriculum mainly in Munster since the author was a Munsterman and concentrated on that region.

Later the young Matt walked to school in Kilkenny and the late Peter Duggan remembered him as he reached the City in his bare feet carrying his boots over his shoulder. This was customary in those days before the affluent Society undermined our values.

It has not been possible to trace with certainty the progress of the parents after Matt junior was ordained and posted to various parishes. His association with the Callan Tenants Protection Society eventually brought the disapproval of his Bishop upon him and, in consequence, on his family. He is said to have returned home briefly to Higginstown when he was dismissed from Callan. It seems that the parents abandoned their home under the pressure of disaffection by Church and State - it may have been that their land tenure was not renewed by the landlord Handford Flood Esq. of Flood Hall. Local tradition indicates that they went to live somewhere "between Callan and Mullinahone" but exactly where they lived out the remainder of the saddened lives has not yet been established. They may have sought refuge

with some of the Keefe families around Newtown or Attateenoe but a Survey of the tombstones there does not record their names. The oldest graveyards near Higginstown, in Templemartin, Churchclara and Rathcoole have no records of their burials either as far as inscriptions on existing tombstones can be deciphered. None of the present families of O'Keefe in the area, in Churchclara, Kilmogar, Lyrath or as far removed as Portlaoise, can account for their fate.

Certain it is that the home and farm was sold to the Barretts of Kilmogar, sometime after 1850, probably in the 1860's. They continued in occupation until it passed to the Joyces, Pat Joyce had married Mary Barrett in the Higginstown home. Parts of the lands were acquired by neighbours and finally the residue and home were purchased from the Joyces by neighbour William Moore in 1984. There was then seventy acres in the holding - this tends to confirm that belief that the Keefe's owned up to 150 acres formerly. My nephew Paddy Prendergast has, on his farm in Higginstown adjoining the original Keefe farm a field of 15 acres known of old as "Keefe's field." That led to this enquiry which has established where exactly Father Matt Keefe³ was born.

In acknowledging my indebtedness to the neighbours in Clara and Higginstown, Ballyreddin and Callan, I must pay a special tribute to Mr. Patrick Moore of Higginstown who was my prime informant but sadly, who died unexpectedly last October before our investigations were completed. He will be remembered with esteem.

It is hoped that this account of a great man will stir the memories of the local families and that further information will be forthcoming from the readers. Father Matt himself died in 1887 as Parish Priest of Aghaboe and is buried in the beautiful Church he had built in Clough where his memory is revered.

Footnotes

1. The Keefe home is marked on Ordnance Survey 6" sheet no. 20 Co. Kilkenny, barony of Gowran, parish of Blackrath, townland of Higginstown, 10.02 cm from West Margin, 10.01 cm from North Margin.
2. Thanks to Canon J. Brennan, Callan and to Dr. Fergus Farrell, St. Kieran's College, Kilkenny for this information from the unpublished Notes of Canon Carrigan. The entries are from the Baptismal Registers. No records of their deaths

are known to me, apart from Fr. Matt's. There is a tradition in Higginstown that at least one daughter was buried in Rathcoole.

3. The surname Keeffe should properly have its O' prefix. Dr. Edward McLysaght, the acknowledged authority on Irish surnames states in his *Irish Families* (1972) "unlike most O' names O'Keeffe is one which has retained the prefix fairly constantly; even in the 1880's when Gaelic ideals were at their nadir." The Kilkenny O'Keeffes derive from their source in Cork known as Pobal O'Keeffe. Since the form Keeffe without the O' was a contemporary usage in Fr. Matt's day I have reluctantly and protestingly used it here.