

Irishtown and the Great Flood of 1763

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Kilkenny is used to floods — most people have probably seen the benches floating in the Black Abbey, and even I have seen a flood in Irishtown. This paper is about a very particular flood, the great flood of 1763 which swept away the two bridges across the Nore and caused untold suffering and loss to the people of Kilkenny and indeed as we shall see, more generally in Co. Kilkenny.

There were not, of course, any local authorities, in any sense of the word, to cope with devastation on any scale and especially on this scale. The only local government was that administered by the Grand Juries and civil parish structures. The relief of the destitute on a very small scale, the maintenance of a few night watchmen and some rudimentary arrangements for street cleaning was about the limit of public services in eighteenth century Ireland.

So what happened in the wake of this worst flood that Kilkenny has ever experienced? There is a folder in the Bishop's study in the Palace containing about one hundred original documents which throw a rare light on what exactly happened to people in the flood and the measures undertaken to help them.

The overall scale of the disaster can be gauged from a calculation which fortunately survives.

	Losses of goods & chattels	Buildings
City	£499	£27
St. Canice's Borough	£430	£136
Thomastown	£359	£66
Callan	£72	£43
Grand Total		£1634

It should be said that the government authorities in Dublin moved both quickly and generously. The flood occurred on 2 October 1763 and on October 8 a letter was written to Bishop Pococke by the Lord Lieutenant's secretary telling him that a sum of £200 was available from the

collector of Revenue in Kilkenny from His Excellency's private purse "to be distributed amongst the unfortunate persons who have suffered by the late inundations in the county and city of Kilkenny and Irishtown, in such manner, and in such proportions as shall be thought right and proper by your Lordship and any two of the following persons whom His Excellency wishes your Lordship to consult with as soon as possible viz.:

The Earl of Carrick,
James Agar Jnr. Esq. M.P. for Co. Kilkenny,
Sir. Wm. Evans Morres Bart. & Mr. Blunden M.P.s for Kilkenny city,

Mr. Mossom M.P. for Irishtown,
Collector Langrishe (if in Kilkenny), or any other Peer or member of Parliament who may happen to be near enough to be applied to. But as the occasion requires despatch and as this sum is intended for immediate relief, it is earnestly recommended by His Excellency that no time be lost in the distribution of it and that particular regard be had in such distribution to the poorer sort of sufferers". Much of the responsibilities of the House of Ormonde fell on the Bishop following the attainder of the second Duke.

The major part of this paper will be taken up with the detailed expenditure of part of this benefaction within the Borough of Irishtown. Other sums which were made available for flood relief and repair of flood damage were as follows: There was a collection in all the parishes of the diocese of Ossory (Church of Ireland) which raised £5,235; while other charitable sources contributed £297. Then large sums had to be spent on the repair of the following bridges:

John's Bridge	£2,789
Greensbridge	£2,828
Bennettsbridge	£1,939
Thomastown	£1,394
Castlecomer	£1,019
Inistioge	£413

The city contributed only £100 each to the repairs of John's Bridge and Greensbridge leaving £5,417 to be contributed by Parliament while the county came up with £2,364 to repair its bridges leaving £2,583 to be contributed by Parliament.

The most interesting part of the cache of documents in the palace was the actual letters sent up to Bishop Pococke by the traders of Irishtown spelling out in graphic detail all the things which had been lost or ruined by the flood.

But first I should mention why they turned to the bishop in this way. There were actually two boroughs in what we now call Kilkenny. The borough of Kilkenny otherwise known as the Hightown or the Englishtown and the borough of Irishtown with the river Bregagh as the boundary between the two. Irishtown had gone to some trouble to maintain its independence from its larger sister — in 1681, for example, Irishtown had obtained an order of the Irish Privy Council allowing it to supervise its own market.

When I refer to the borough of Kilkenny as the larger sister this was the case in terms of wealth and commerce but not in population. In the census of 1841 the parish of St. Canice contained more than half the population of the whole of Kilkenny. But whereas the customs revenues of Kilkenny proper were farmed out at £250 - £300 p.a., those of Irishtown were worth only a quarter or a fifth of that. In 1749 they had been set for a mere £60. In short, Irishtown was very largely an overpopulated slum.

From early times and certainly prior to the Reformation, Irishtown was a classic example of a pocket borough and in this case in the bishop's pocket. I imagine that the development of Irishtown as a separate borough around the Palace was in effect a way of guaranteeing the feudal independence of the Bishop of Ossory and of the Church, even against that powerful potentate, the Earl of Ormonde, living in sight of him in Kilkenny Castle.

It is clear that by the eighteenth century the corporation of Irishtown was completely in the pocket of the established church. Although from 1746 Roman Catholics were allowed to trade freely in both boroughs, all voice in municipal affairs was restricted to those who could take the oath of conformity to the Crown in matters of Church and state. Quite clearly the corporation of Irishtown was a farce. The corporation was headed by the portreeve nominated annually on St. Matthew's day (September 21st) and then admitted on St. Canice's day (October 11th). Below him came the burgesses

(about five in number) and below them a very small number of freemen. This was what made up the assembly of Irishtown which held its meetings “in the Lord Bishop of Ossory’s Hall”. Not only were all the members Protestant but the bishop had a further safeguard in that two names had to be submitted to him for the office of portreeve, and he then chose one of them for the admission on St. Canice’s day. Frequently the portreeve was one of the city clergy, as for example, the archdeacon, Dr. Cockburn, who was admitted as portreeve only a few days after the flood. It was he who presided over an extraordinary assembly held in the Bishop’s Hall on November 5 1763, attended by the customary six burgesses at which it was decided to petition the House of Commons for aid in re-building Greensbridge. The petition was to be presented by their own M.P. and as we know, this met a very generous response from the Irish Parliament.

Well so much for the formalities of civic government, what was going on at ground level or rather flood level? We have more or less detailed statements from about one hundred residents of Irishtown as to what exactly they lost. Since these took the form of sworn affidavits they represent a new and reliable body of evidence for the history of Kilkenny in the eighteenth century which will, I hope, be drawn on by other historians in the future.

Naturally, most of those who wrote in were traders, since they had the most to lose in terms of stock and equipment and fortunately for us they usually mention both their trade and their address. There were, not surprisingly, several millers: James Brennan of the Black Mill who got £3.11.2 in compensation for his “house being levelled to the ground”. The widow Costalow of the lower end of Mill Lane: “A piece of Compass timber, Mill Machinery for cleaning corn, the Walls of the Mill, all the inside wrecked totally out of repair and the cabbin wherein petitioner lives being the next one house to the river all shattered and out of all repair inside and outside, together with most of the furniture damaged. And to add more grief to poor petitioner that her horse strayed away or stolen having no place to stable him since the flood and her mill is idle since.” (Claimed £10, got £6).

John Cody of Greensbridge, Miller:

“Lost by wracking of two mills & materials thereunder belonging:	30. 0. 0
4 tons of hay @ 20/- per ton	4. 0. 0
small timber and boards	5.13. 9
30 stone of wheat @ 10d per stone	1. 5. 0
1 iron beam and scales	1. 2. 9
several working tools	5. 0
a peticoat, a mantle, a shifte and some head clothes	16. 0
3 glass windows @ 1/4 each	4. 0
wracking of his wines”	6.13. 4
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Total	£49.19.10
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(Ordered £30. for buildings.)

Then there were what we would call corn dealers such as Ellinor Walsh of the Blackmill, widow.

Inventory of losses sustained by Ellinor Walsh of the Blackmill, widow:

“20 stone of wheat @ 10d ???	16. 8
12 stone of oats @ 5d	5. 0
8 stone small barley @ 5d	3. 4
straw	4. 0
2 bed blankets	3. 0
a large dale box lock and hinges”	1. 8
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(signs by mark) £1.13. 8

There was a bakery run by Mary Keating “next door to the George Inn in Irishtown”.

4 barrells and 4 stone of malt	2.12. 0
3 stone of wheat flour	3. 0
3 dozen bakers bread	3. 0
1 pair of worsted stockings	2. 2
3 glass windows	3. 0
1 chest of drawers slightly damaged	4. 6
1 bedstead	1. 6
crushed worsted	4. 0

1 new dish	1. 4
1 iron hook	6
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Total	3.15. 0
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(ordered £1.)	

And by inference there was also a couple of woollen mills in the vicinity. The following petition was addressed to Revd. Nicholas Martin who was the Dean's Vicar Choral from 1732 - 1768, from Patrick Stapleton, butcher, in Irishtown:-

"Your petitioner is a man of a great charge, seven small children that are poor helpless creatures and nothing to support them but his own industry. Your petitioner on Saturday ye Ist inst. sent two pieces of blankets to Mr. Bibby's Mill, one containing 108 yards valued at 1/- each and the other 60 yards valued at 9d each yard. They were both lost in the flood he begs you to intercede for him to his Lordship and Sir William to have him considered with ye rest of ye sufferers as it was other people's substance that you poor petitioner dealt upon"

(Endorsed: "miserable".)

Mary Cullivan lost "a piece of ruggs" which was taken out of Mr. Bibby's mill by the late flood which lost her 13/-, which was "her whole dependence to maintain herself and her languishing small family". (counter signed by Thos. Bibby "I know the above to be lost"). (Paid in full).

John Coffey, a poor weaver had sent a piece of blanketing, value £1.12.0, to Scott's mill in Green Street to be milled, it was carried away with the rest. "That ye petitioner has been looking for said piece ever since the flood by which means your poor petitioner has lost his health by the cold water but no account of your poor petitioner's piece of blanket". (no result).

Indeed sheep and wool and its by-products figured largely in the Irishtown of 1763.

Edward Fitzpatrick (who signed by his mark) of Green Street, skinner, lost:

30 stone of wool @ 7/-	10.10. 0
10 stone of coarse wool @ 4/-	2. 0. 0

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a parcel of black wool	7. 0
3 stone of tail wool @ 2/6	7. 6
5 dozen pelts @ 4/6	1. 2. 6
malt and ale	2. 0. 0
damages done to house, offices, windows & partitions	2.10. 0
20 wool skeins @ 1/4	1.14. 8
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Total	20.11. 8
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(ordered: Losses £15. buildings £2.)

Nicholas Walsh of Green Street, cooper, lost:

3 stone of wool @ 6/3 per stone	18. 9
2 stone do. @ 4/4 per stone	8. 8
2 stone of feathers @ 7/- per stone	14. 0
a new silk handkerchief	2. 8
2 shirts & one shift	9. 0
waistcoat	2. 0
4 dozen of barrell hoops @ 1/6 per dozen	6. 0
1 dozen of car hoops	9

This last was mainly a cooper — that is a maker of wooden casks and barrells but it seems clear that the major trade was in hides — both cattle and sheep and in the various leather goods resulting.

Nicholas Laughy “opposite Mill Lane in the Corporation of Irishtown” breechesmaker, reported: “that said sudden inundation both destroyed and carried away of petitioners worldly substance, consisting of 100 and half of pelts being whole leather to the amount of £3/8/3 and upwards as also petitioner’s dwelling house shattered, the wall undermined together with other articles carried away which he can’t ascertain; that poor petitioner must turn mendicant if not fairly relieved having nothing left to support himself and four in family all helpless and depending on petitioner’s labour.” (ordered £2.)

Edward Shee, leather cutter, of the “Corporation of Irishtown” had 60 hides damaged and “rotted full of mud”

60 hides damaged	3. 0. 0
1 counter broken and "touren" out of the ground	10. 0
3 dozen of veals skins damnified	4. 6
dozen of shoemakers knives lost by water	2. 0

Patrick Troy, tanner, lost:

6 tons of oak bark (used to cure leather)	36. 0. 0
"ouse in the pitts"	12. 0. 0
Houses and walls thrown down in the yard	9. 0. 0
Household furniture destroyed	6.16. 6

Total	£63.16. 6
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Mary Murphy and Alice her sister, lost:

2 tons of Bonnettstown bark bought of Mr. John Brennan, Merchant	13. 0. 0
10 tons of Bonnettstown bark bought of Messers Hackett & Newman	65. 0. 0
Leather damaged & loss of oze	10. 0. 0
Household goods	20. 0. 0
Dwelling house and offices	40. 0. 0

Total	£148. 0. 0
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(ordered £100).

Edward Reed, weaver, had 100 yards of broad blanket damaged and torn in pieces by the flood

	£8. 0. 0
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James McMullen of Dean Street, Linen weaver, lost:

28 stone of moults	1. 8. 0
4½ lb. of hops	5. 3

Total	£1.13. 3
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(order £1.)

There was, as you might expect, more than one publican. Here is the case of Elizabeth Kelly (one can't help noticing that many of the substantial traders were women). "A widow these many years & supported by her industry a family of six helpless children in decency until the late flood destroyed and ruined her, having carried away and rendered useless all the ale and porter and the greater part of the wearing apparel of herself and children so that from being in easy circumstances she was almost in a moment reduced to beggary and want." (She looked for £15, got £5).

Edward Lannigan of Irishtown, shopkeeper.	
10 gallons of shrub @ 5/9	2.17. 6
20 gallons of brandy @ 4/8	4.13. 4
1 gallon of bitter	5. 0
4 gallons of whiskey @ 2/6	10. 0
Damage caused to his house by the fall of portions of other ruins, besides the damage done to a new feather bed and other furniture	2. 5. 6
Carriage of the above liquers	5. 5
A cambrick handkerchief	4. 6
A kentucky handkerchief	1. 6
1 yard of cambrick	4. 0
2 yards new linen	3. 0
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Total	£11. 9. 9
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(got £6).

There was a blacksmith and an exotic periwig maker who nonetheless had stock in trade that smelt suspiciously of strong liquer: "Losses of Robert Leahy of Greensbridge, blacksmith.

Damage to a feather bed	5. 5
Damage to woollen yarn	5. 5
the partition of the house shattered and broken: lofts damaged and roof which no less will repair as it was before said flood than £1.	1. 0. 0
Damage done to a bellows at least	10.10

The wall of a back house cracked and broken being a loss at heart	5. 5
Turf	2. 6
Wood	2. 6
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Total	£2.12. 1
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(ordered: losses £1. buildings £1.)

Philip Lawler of the Corporation of Irishtown, periwig maker:

5 barrels of ale	5. 0. 0
1 barrel of beer	1. 0. 0
1 hogshead of cider	1. 4. 0
3 chairs	4. 0
Hair lost and damaged	1. 0. 0
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Total	£8. 8. 0
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(ordered £5).

Continuing on the luxury side, there was “a parchment maker and glueboiler” one John Pembroke of “Fox Hall in corp. of Irishtown” who wrote “Destroyed and carried away petitioner’s worldly substance, parchment glew, oyle and other articles and working utensils £6.8.5. That to add to the poor petitioner’s affliction, his wife who was then in childbirth was obliged to be removed from the fury of the waters, in consequence whereof she and her child soon after died, being a loss to your petitioner superior to every earthly consideration as she was a most valuable, industrious woman and petitioner’s greatest and principal assistance, whereby petitioner is reduced to a most pitiful condition and a real object of commiseration.” (Endorsed: “gave in part for immediate use £1.2.9”).

Roger Meighan, Innholder, had 14” of water in his dining room and bedchambers yet nonetheless claimed only for the loss of his bar stock.

60 barrells of malt @ 6d being the half value	18. 0. 0
12 tunns hay @ 10 shillings do.	6. 0. 0
5 hogsheads of beer	15. 0. 0
4 barrels of ale	5. 0. 0
3 barrells of oats	1. 1. 0
15 barrels of beer and barley @ 3 shillings	2. 5. 0
Malthouse left broken down	1.10. 0
Kitchen furniture broken and carried away	2.10. 0
10 bottles of honey @ 2/4	1. 3. 4
6 dozen of bottles broken	12. 0
sundries broken and destroyed in the cellars	1.15. 0
do. broken and destroyed and the stables	15. 0
Brewing vessels and barrels lost and stand	1. 6. 0
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Total	£56.17. 4
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(granted £50).

Another lady mixed corn and coal. Judith Walsh (endorsed “next door to the widow Kelly’s”) wrote: “Your petitioner lived in Irishtown at the time of the dreadful flood having a little shop with several little things for sale and by the said flood your petitioner is reduced to the lowest ebb having lost in coal, charcoal, 30 stone of wheat with several necessary fit for seal which your petitioner is quite ruined with 12 pound of flax, 2 barrels of malt, 1 petticoat”.

2 Kishes of stone coal	12. 0
3 barrels of charcoal	4. 6
30 stone of wheat	1. 2. 0
2 barrels of malt	1. 4. 0
1 petticoat value	10. 0
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Total (other things apparently omitted in setting out)	3.12. 6
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(No result given).

Then there were a whole range of hard luck tales from the inhabitants in general.

Margaret Grace “having lost 5 & 20 yards of dressed frieze which poor petitioner had to cover her children coming the hard weather, that poor petitioner’s children will perish in the cold weather of your Lordship of your accustomed goodness does not insert her amongst the number of your Lordship’s petitioners as it is quite out of the poor petitioner’s power to relieve her poor children this season”

John Gotter “is a sufferer by this great flood . . . losing the bed he and his poor orphants lies on, his working utensils, body close and your petitioner has been idle ever since by means of a violent cold he got in said watter saving his poor orphants not being able to labour to procure them bread”. (actual losses £1/7/1).

Joan Fleming “your petitioner is a poor widow destitute of any friend able to relieve her distress having 2 children to provide for lost to the value of 13/- worth by the late flood and your poor petitioner humbly implores of your Lord Bishop to extend your charity towards this poor petitioner as she and her poor orphans will as in duty bound ever pray”. (ordered 10/-).

Elizabeth Brophy otherwise Fitzpatrick — addresses her petition to Sir William Evans Morres Bart. — she was the wife of Edmund Fitzpatrick of Friars Bridge, Turner. “Your poor petitioner’s doors were broken open, bed and bedclothes, wearing apparel, timber and working tools to the value of £1.5.0 Petitioner has charge of 5 helpless children and very little to support them. Petitioner’s husband is in a very bad state of health this considerable time past — reduced to a most indigent condition — must inevitably perish if not relieved by your Honour”. Endorsed “rejected”.

Elizabeth Wilkinson (who signed by her mark) of “Fryar Bridge — Corporation of Irishtown”. Your petitioner “who is a very poor woman and a real object of compassion” lost:

A poplin gown spoiled	5. 5
A broad cloth cloak	11. 4
3 lb. of flax	2. 3
A flax wheel	5. 5
A prayer book	6½

Nicholas Walsh, “an inhabitant of the Corporation of Irishtown these seventy years. Your poor petitioner providing to have some little matter for your poor petitioner’s internment the last day lost the sum of 15/9, also a cat . . . poor petitioner’s house totally damaged and would have inevitably perished were it not for the assistance of neighbours that came to your poor petitioner’s assistance as your poor petitioner lay in a languishing condition . . . now advancing to the age of 80”. — puts in for £1.1.2.

Catherine Phelan. “A poor helpless and distressed widow of Green Street, husband killed by an accident in service of Mrs Mary Murphy and her sisters tavern in Green St.” — (they have been supporting her and her two children but can’t continue to do so due to their misfortunes in the flood).

Mary Shay, Dean Street. “A poor and distressed widow being lame these several years and not able to do anything for her support and by the unhappy deluge of water was wracked in a most deplorable condition to ye amount to the best of her knowledge of about £1.12.0”.

John McGuinness, had come all the way from Dublin to work at paving — “that in Green St. where he lodges he lost and hardly escaped his life a blew cloth coat, a pair of shag britches, 2 pairs of stockings etc. £1.0.0”.

Simon O’Mara, “an honest endeavouring man”. Lost by water 4½ barrels of malt and “a door and his cabin wracked in a very bad condition. His wife would surely be drowned had it not been that she broke out at the gable end of the house and crept from house to house to preserve her life and remained on one of the house steps until the water assuaged”. Claimed £2.15.6. “rejected”.

To Rev. William Chartres — perpetual curate of St. Mary’s was addressed. “The humble petition of William Motley a poor old man past his labour. That petitioner’s only son who was his entire support was drowned in Green St. in the late dreadful flood and all that his son was possessed of was swept away by the same. That petitioner has now neither friend or means to relieve him and will inevitably perish unless charitably considered”. (By Mr. Chartres’ order £3).

I’m sorry to have to say that there was one claimant who made quite sure that it would be realised that he was a

Protestant for he claimed for the loss of a whole range of religious reading that would do credit to a clergyman:-

This was John Matthews who claimed as follows for losses by the late flood at Black Mill in the parish of St. Canice.

A feather bed and bolster	1.10. 0
1 pair broad blankets	8. 0
1 pair sheets	4. 0
1 rugg	4. 0
1 table	1. 0
2 large washing tubs	3. 0
1 pot broke	1. 6
3 chairs broke	1. 0
3 wooden dishes	6
6 trenchers	1. 6
1 large pail	6
2 shirts	4. 0
4 lb. tobacco	2.10
1 lb. snuff	1. 6
6 lb. candles	1.11
Half gross pipes	1. 7½
2 pieces of garters	1. 0
2 ozs. thread	2. 0
1 oz. silk	1. 5
1 bible	2. 0
Direction for the sick	6
1 prayer book	6
1 whole duty of man	6
A week's preparation	4
A manual of prayer	4
A Brief exposition of the christian catechism	4
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Total	£4. 0. 5½
Against this he says "The Rev. Wm. Broderick took compassion of me and gave me	1. 2. 9
The Rev Mr Dawson	6½
Mrs Dawson	1. 1
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Total (Order £3).	£1. 4. 4½