

The Parish and its History

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The parish of Peterswell is situated in south County Galway , 3 miles east of the town of Gort. It borders the Ardrahan parish in the north and stretches across the Slieve Aughty Mountains to the county Clare border, a distance of almost 10 miles. On the western side it adjoins the parishes of Kilbeacanty and Gort with Ardrahan, Kilchreest and Derrybrien to the east. It has an area of 11,700 acres. The parish includes part of 2 baronies, Loughrea and Kiltartan and 41 town lands, 24 and 17 in each barony respectively. The official name of the parish is Kilthomas.

Famine Years

Peterswell had a population of 3,278 people according to the census of 1841 and they lived in 584 houses. It is not known how many died or how many emigrated in the famine, which followed the failure of the potato crop. Potatoes were the staple diet of the Irish at the time when they were destroyed by blight. The census of 1851 shows that the population had dropped to 1,903, a loss of 1,375 among the locality's residents since 1841! Some of them surely ended their days in the Gort Workhouse. The first admission to the Workhouse was on the 11th of December 1841, when it opened. It had cost £5,250 to build and £1,150 to furnish and equip and it had accommodation for 500 people. When the famine ended in the late 1840's there were many families living in poverty stricken circumstances.

Peterswell Relief Committee 1880

In 1880, the Peterswell Relief Committee was set up under the chairmanship of Father Jerome Fahy. The district representatives were Martin Kelly, Jim Fahy, Dan Kearns,

The Joe Cooley Memorial Hall

Thomas O'Donnell, P. Kelleher, William Kerans, Thomas Kelly, Pat Burke, and a local dignitary J. Galbraith Esq. By the 7th of February the amount of meal distributed to the poor of the parish was 388 stone and it cost £35-2-2. This provided relief for 124 families. The main sources of funding were:- The Mansion House Relief Committee, who gave 9 donations totalling £270, the Most Reverend Dr. McEvilly (Bishop of Galway) gave £45, with instruction to spend some of the money on seed potatoes. Later he donated 7 tonnes of champion seed potatoes. Other donors were the Herald Relief Fund giving 7 donations amounting to £65, the Land League gave £20, the Marlborough Relief Fund gave £17 while the Philadelphia Relief Fund gave £25 and the New York Herald gave £10. At a meeting of the Peterswell Relief Committee on Sunday the 24th of July it was shown that the quantity of meal distributed on the week ending the 23rd instance was 456 stones at a cost of £29-7-6, providing 184 families with assistance. The Peterswell Relief Committee on the eve of suspending their labours, begged to give public expression of their deep sense of indebtedness to the Mansion House Relief Committee. They desired to record with deep gratitude that the work of feeding the suffering poor of the parish during the 6 months just past had been effected mainly through the magnificent grants forwarded to them by the Mansion House Committee and by the generous charities of the Most Reverend Dr McEvilly, Bishop of the Diocese.

"We Shall Long retain a grateful recollection of the humane attention to the wants of this district manifested by the Right Hon. The Lord Mayor and by the other people associated with his noble labours of charity during this year of crucial suffering." James Leonard, Secretary to the Committee

Slieve Aughty

About 500 acres of the parish is in the Slieve Aughty Mountains and consists mostly of bogland. It is obvious from the cut away bogs that it was all forestry in bygone years. Turf, the main source of fuel was cut and saved there for centuries. The saving of turf was at its peak in the 1940's during the Second World War as only a limited amount of coal was available. Besides supplying the local and adjoining areas there was a big demand for turf in Dublin. Horses and creels were used to deliver the turf locally while lorries were used to transport the turf to Dublin where it was stacked in the Phoenix Park for the poor of Dublin. In the 1950's turf cutting went into decline and at this time the Department of Forestry began planting trees on the mountain. Now 50 years later very little turf is saved there.

Farming

The rest of the parish could be referred to as mixed land, some parts very fertile and other parts wet and stony. The arable areas

were used for hay and tillage and the rougher areas were used for grazing. During the war years 1939-1945, it was compulsory for farmers to till 3/8 of their arable land. Crops of the time included cereal crops of wheat, oats and barley and root crops of potatoes, mangels, turnips and sugar beet. It was a time of near complete self-sufficiency when people grew their own vegetables, produced their own milk and butter, reared pigs and cured their own bacon, raised their own poultry to supply eggs and some even spun their own wool for knitting. One enterprising parishioner, John Willie Fitzgerald of Lecknabegga, set up his own wind charger and generated electricity for his own use, a man ahead of his time. All farm work up to about the late 1940s was done with horses. After those years horses started to be replaced by tractors. People kept more cows and sold the milk to the creameries. They also reclaimed marginal land and with the use of fertilisers output increased.

Snow

The spring of 1947-Black '47-saw the heaviest snowfall ever and it did not thaw for weeks. Late April and early May were very warm and the children had discarded their shoes and were going to school in their bare feet. But on the 10th of May there was another snowfall and it was back to the boots again. That year, the last of the snow on the North side of the Mountain did not melt until June.

Tradesmen

Most people worked on the land. There were 3 blacksmiths in the parish, Fitzgerald of Lecknabegga, Hynes of Gortadragan and Leary of Cappard. John Hallinan had a sawmill and grinding mill and his brother Martin was a wheelwright and made harrows and other equipment needed by the local farmers. There were many thatchers, the best known was Bartley Connors of Hollymount who travelled far and near all year round plying his trade. The last great thatcher was Paddy Lally of Ballylee. He was shown plying his trade on RTE when Ballylee Castle and House were being restored. The last tailor was Paddy Caulfield, who was a noted hurler who died at the early age of 28 in 1941. His workshop was situated between Cooney's shop and the old school.

Shopping

In the days long before supermarkets and malls the shopping public of Peterswell had five retail outlets to choose from. In fine Irish tradition two of the shops were groceries-come-pubs as was the norm at the time; Hayes and Sherries. Lahiff's has changed hands a few times and was owned by Gavins, Fitzgeralds, Keoghs, McDonaghs and Geoghegans and is now run as a pub only and trades under the name of "Hunters Lodge". Eoin Harte ran the Public House where Maureen

O'Donnell's house is now. Harte's pub ceased trading in the early part of the last century. Sherry's formerly Sheehans and now Flaherty's no longer deals in groceries and operates as a pub only and is known as "Yeat's Lodge". Since the 1950's Cooneys have run a grocery that was owned by Cunninghams and is now the only remaining grocery and post office in the parish. In the 1930's Cooney's also had a shop in a relative's premises "The Shaughnessy's" of Skehanagh. It opened only for a few hours each day and closed during the early days of the Second World War. Last but not least was McNerney's of Hollymount. McNerney's closed about 1940. Up to the mid 1950s the Post Office was run at Cuilmore near the crossroads by Mrs Lyons. The mail came from Loughrea by bicycle per Bertie Kelly and was then delivered on foot by the local postman Joe Ford. Joe was very keen on hurling and always encouraged the young people of the parish to play the game. He represented the Club at South Board meetings for many years.

Garda Barracks

The Garda barracks was there since the RIC was founded. Vincent Donoghue, whose father served in the RIC in Peterswell in the early 1900s and attended National school in Peterswell became President of the GAA in 1952, representing Co. Waterford. The father of a recent President of the GAA, Mr Seán McCauley, served as a Garda in the Peterswell Barracks in 1940. The Barracks have been out of use for a number of years now.

Electricity

Electricity came to the North of the parish in 1948 and it was some years later before it was extended to the rest of the area. Initially most houses got one light per room and one socket in the kitchen. Very few got an outside light. The "switch on" took place on the 31st of May and when the first bills came the following August they were the source of much debate. (It is interesting to note how little times have changed). One household had used only one unit of electricity! It was some time before people got any electrical appliances in their houses and longer still before they used electricity around the farmyard