

Introduction

An article with descriptions of the 1886 Hurricane on the Wicklow coast, the 1867 Great Storm and the Vartry Reservoir, and the Floods of 1931; with a consideration of their consequences and how the impact of weather disasters have changed over time. The latter two sections and conclusion have been adapted from *Floods and Consequences* published by the author in the *Roundwood Historical Journal*, no. 14; the first section has not been previously published.

The 1886 Hurricane hits coastal Wicklow

On 15-16th October 1886 a hurricane, at least equal in intensity to the Great Wind of 1839, devastated the island for two days before leaving a further trail of shipwreck, death and destruction in the Irish Sea, Wales, southern England, and northern Europe and may be the same that swept across Texas and Louisiana on the 12th. Its passage across Ireland was described in daily and regional newspapers; though many have little or no local information. Locally the *Wicklow Newsletter* had reports, 23rd October to the end of November, from Bray, Greystones, Wicklow and Arklow, but none from the mountains. The damage in Arklow where the flooding and storm damage were worst, was widely reported around Ireland.

In Bray flooding forced immediate evacuations in Captain's Ave., Bath St. and Commons when houses were inundated to 3-4 feet early in the morning; others took refuge in lofts. In Greystones the *Sarah Jane*, a schooner belonging to Mr. Evans local coal merchant, went ashore on the North Beach when heavy winds dragged her anchor, where it was destroyed, tugs sent from Dublin and Kingstown did not arrive in time. However, the cargo of coal was saved but whatever remained of the wreck was sold 4th November.

In Wicklow there was damage to houses when tiles and slates were blown away, the County Hotel "a most dangerous building" and other houses on Main St. were the worst hit, while burst sewers flooded houses. There were no casualties except for a lamplighter who was nearly washed away. He was rescued by nearby sailors and suffered head injuries from being dashed against stonework. The "old stand-house" on the Murrough lost another wing and "will no longer give sufficient shelter to a rodent". The Murrough bank was further eroded; it had already lost 100 yards of coast in living memory, a problem exacerbated by the removal of sand and gravel for construction.

There was little maritime damage though the Harbour Board ordered new mooring chains (10-12s a cwt) after a vessel burst her moorings and went adrift. Their main problem was the removal of a hulk that sank 35 years previously. In the intervening period the wreck's cargo of ore that had been spread by currents and waves, had settled and set like concrete. The Clerk spent approximately £90 in its removal (c. £15 came from the sale of ore collected while dredging) in removing it to the beach where it could be sold off. The hurricane had broken it up making the task somewhat easier.

Continuing bad weather on the 9th November nearly destroyed the brigantine *Mary J. Wilber*, which had taken refuge in Wicklow after failing to negotiate the Codlin Bank when its borrowed hawser failed; it illegally didn't have its own. The Harbour Master, Mr. Hamilton, and local coast guards secured it. On a lighter note a Murrough resident complained to the paper that the lights were not lit during the storm and this resulted in him being rolled into the gutter after a collision with a person double his weight. The paper offered its sympathy and hoped that "his next collision will be with some one of lighter build."

The worst damage happened in Arklow when floodwaters, of a height and volume not seen in living memory, floated one of the many dilapidated old hulks lying derelict in the upper part of the river. It collided with the *Ida*, a schooner owned by James Tyrell, which was hove down on her side and attached to a heavy barge by pulleys for repairs. The three were then swept into the fleet of fishing smacks, anchored lower down, carrying twenty-three out of the harbour, while the *Ida* passed the new pier and was thrown broadside onto the pier slope on the southern side of the breakwater with the hulk's keel lodged inside, where it rapidly broke up. Most of the smacks were holed below their water lines and sank at the river's mouth, while the rest were swept out to sea.

News of the catastrophe was quickly spread through the town and in a very short time "all the inhabitants were on the pier and regardless of rain and sea they gazed on the scene of destruction". It was

impossible to launch the lifeboat due to the flood so volunteer men; women and children carried it half a mile to the beach. Five launch attempts failed when it was thrown broadside back up to the beach but the sixth was successful and carrying a crew of John Reilly, Charles Tyrell, Laurence McDonagh, William Manifold, Michael Manifold, Matthew Flood, John Waddock, Richard Hayes, John Mahon, Peter Murphy, James Russell, Samuel Kinsella, James Timmins and Richard Waddock (coxswain) plus around thirty volunteers set off on rescue.

They first reached the *Glance*, a first class mackerel boat (Thomas Kavanagh) about five miles offshore. It was boarded and brought back to port with difficulty as it had been holed and would not have survived much longer. Next found was the *Green Flag* (Neill & Hannigan), about half a mile from the bank and eight miles from the harbour. It was boarded by Daniel, Patrick and Andrew Neill, sons of the owner, and Peter Waddock and brought back safely, as was the *Jackdaw* (J. Reynolds) by a crew of three. The *Safe Return* (W. Canterbury) caused problems as she drifted dismasted between Glassgonnan Bank and Arklow Rock about six and a half miles from shore. The first attempt to rescue her failed when the first man to attempt boarding her (Kendall) fell into the sea and was rescued with difficulty. However, nearby was the undamaged *Mary Francis* (Mrs. Kearon), and she was used to tow the former back to harbour. The lifeboat was unable to save one that went down on the banks and another was seen drifting on the far side.

In the meantime the *Quckstep* (Myles Byrne) caught her anchor on some wreckage on a bank. A couple of "brave fellows" boarded her, attached steel hawsers to the bow, which were passed to the shore and she was hauled to a safe berth on the river. However the *Tiara* (James Canterbury) went down on the bar, as did the *Robert Emmett* and *Onnie* (John Reynolds), the former's masts could be seen above the wave. Other losses were *Two Brothers* (Matthew Noctor), *Archdeacon* and *Snowdrop* (John Reynolds), *Annie* (James Murphy), *Erin's Hope*, *John and Mary* and *Margaret and Kate* (Samuel Dickson), *Mountain Hare* (Patrick Loughlin), *Alma* (John Doyle), *Virtue* (Laurence Toole), *Pheasant* (Michael Tyrrell), *Susan Jane* (John Counsell), *Sunburst* (Thomas Kavanagh), *Margaret and John* (John Manifold), *Star of the Sea* (John Pearson), *Mary* (J. Stafford), *Maggie* (William Kavanagh) and *Elizabeth Mary* (Matthew Noctor).

In the aftermath damage to the fishing fleet was estimated at £3,500 plus loss of income to the 150 put out of work (about 6-8 crew per boat). Many of the boats had been built ten years ago from grants known as 'Gladstone's Money', which were modest loans for the development of the Irish fishing industry. In one case the owner had just paid off a loan of £40 for repairs before his boat was lost.

The Board of Works, who was usually criticized after any such disaster, was cleared in this instance, as it was the Wicklow Copper Mining Company who placed the wooden mooring post to which the *Ida* was attached. Representatives of the Board of Works and Irish Fisheries Board (and on behalf of the Lord Lieutenant) visited the scene, while the Deputy Receiver of Wrecks, on behalf of the Board of Trade, held a preliminary and private investigation. What the Harbour Master thought of the disaster was not recorded, which is a pity as some years previously he had prosecuted the hulk's owners but lost the case (and costs) because it was argued that they were doing no harm and would be repaired when the fishing improved.

Naturally there was no insurance so local gentry formed a Relief Committee particularly when it became clear that no Government compensation would be forthcoming. An appeal was set up and by the end of November about £1,400 had been raised. Benefit concerts were held in Arklow and Gorey headlined by *The Original White-Eyed Christy Minstrels*, a five-piece ensemble led by J. K. Toomey on first violin that was very popular, the Newspaper's editor suggested that they should be invited to Wicklow.

Obviously donor fatigue was not an issue, as these concerts followed the Canadian Jubilee Singers, under the management of Bishop Disney, who held fundraising concerts entitled *Sacred Concert of Slave Melodies* on behalf of the Theological College, Chatham, Ontario, for the education of young coloured men for African and other Mission Work. They were all descended from slaves and sang hymns from religious meetings of plantations in the USA and West Indies.

Storms and floods have been the bane of Arklow since earliest times though since the decline of the Irish Sea herring industry there probably hasn't been one so destructive to local fishermen, though it has to be said that Arklow ship owners who had abandoned hulks in the river bear some responsibility. Fortunately there were no fatalities unlike elsewhere on the Irish Sea, English Channel and North Sea where perhaps several hundred sailors were lost in different shipwrecks around the coasts.

The 1867 Hurricane and the Vartry Reservoir

In March, the following year, a hurricane nearly destroyed the Varty Reservoir in much the same way as Hurricane Charlie in 1986. Articles in the *Wicklow Newsletter* of 16th February and 9th March 1867 describe the events.

The problem began with a pipe valve, which had been recently installed to carry off surplus flow in the reservoir in the wake of the Sheffield disaster, where the lack of an overflow lead to its collapse and major loss of life. This 48-inch pipe, with valve and sluice, was built into the eastern embankment but the valve had broken and had let out the water unrestricted. The solution was to install a plug, which was done with great difficulty, but naturally led to the build up of water in the reservoir after the heavy rains of the previous few months and snow melt from the mountains.

This, by early February, amounted to 250 million gallons of water contained in 450 acres reaching 50-foot depth at the embankment and getting larger. It threatened the dam with catastrophic consequences for the inhabitants from the Devil's Glen to the Murrough. The pressure of water created a leak in the embankment that could not be traced due to the height of water. With the water reaching danger levels the engineers were faced with the problem of what to do next. Their solutions were to unplug the pipe and to dig a cut in the embankment, where the overflow pipe was, to relieve the pressure.

It was difficult to remove the plug. Divers were employed for a week (crawling around the pond "like crabs or lobsters" as one critic unkindly put it) who attached chained anchors to the plug. An attempt was made to then pull it out but the moorings failed and postponed until stronger and more suitable gearing could be obtained.

In the meantime up to 350 men were employed in deepening and widening the temporary cut, called the 'by-wash', which brought the level of water down a modest 10-inches from its eventual peak of 56 feet. The engineers saw this as satisfactory but the leak's source remained undiscovered. As a precaution levels were constantly taken and rockets were set to give warning to the Ashford area should the dam collapse. Naturally those that could afford to do so had already evacuated.

Two days after their first attempt they managed to extract the plug, the waters receded, the reservoir emptied, and, in time, the various teething problems fixed. However the controversy did not go away. The Waterworks Committee, under Sir John Grey, denied that there had been a major problem and that the "embankment was always and is safe", but had to spend a lot of time in Roundwood soothing people's fears.

There does appear a certain secretiveness combined with public relations. Nobody was sure what was going on, rumours and platitudes were the main source of information. In the meantime the city engineer, Mr. Neville, "met with an accident which narrowly escaped from being of a serious nature". This unexplained incident happened on Saturday but not reported till Monday, on Tuesday he was reported to be gradually recovering and able to walk.

The Wicklow Harbour Commissioners sent a deputation and reported that there was no danger but an eye should be kept on the situation. They added that should the dam burst its force would be partially spent by the time it reached the Murrough and would probably make a passage into the sea at Tinnakilly; they concluded that there would be little damage to the harbour. This was of little consolation to the residents of those areas that would have born the brunt of 250 million gallons (120 times the volume of a 'normal flood' as calculated by a hostile witness). They do not appear to have considered what the consequences would have been to Wicklow trade had the Tinnakilly cut had become permanent and the railway line washed away.

Heavy criticism came from residents of the Ashford area who had fought long and hard against the reservoir. Their legal challenges had eventually failed and it had gone ahead much to their disgust since they believed their rights had been subverted by a despotism that "not infrequently outrages society". Their opinion was that "intolerant individuals", who masqueraded under good intentions, were responsible for delivering fresh clean water to Dublin. Their strident letters to newspapers were published under the anonymity of 'N' or 'A Tourist'. However some criticisms were valid and they had employed engineers who recommended the insertion of sluice gates in the embankment; however this advice was ignored.

They asked the obvious question that if there was no danger why were 350 men, a considerable workforce, employed in making the cut, removing the coping stones from a recently built wall for the dam, and "mixing stable manure &c and filling up a 'sinking' on the east side of the dam with this material". They had also

earlier criticized the quality of the puddling stating that “an important part of the work was of an inferior description” and claimed to have discovered the leak six months previously. Overall their constant pressure during the period of planning probably made the Vartry a safer reservoir though the Waterworks Committee would have been the last to admit it.

It was in the landowner’s interest to paint the blackest picture since this was a powerful argument in the continuing compensation claims against the Waterworks Committee by the residents of Ashford, Newrathbridge, Coolawinna and Tinnakilly. By the same token it was in the interest of the Committee to minimize the potential risk since they wanted to keep damages, if awarded, as little as possible. So, on one level, this was all about money and would be subject to the usual costly legal battle.

The *Wicklow Newsletter* report of the 17th February gives a breathless daily report of the events as they unfolded. While it reported the Committee’s pronouncements without comment the fact that the reporter knew no more than anyone else what was going on imbues it with high anxiety and real fear felt by local people. One can imagine families from the Glen to the Murrough keeping night watch for rockets, ready to depart and abandon everything in an instant. It would have been unfortunate had cloud obscured the rockets and muffled their sound, presuming they had not become damp. No wonder there was little faith in this primitive early warning system.

Nothing is known about the 350 men who worked on the dam for that week. Presumably some would have been local but many would have been drafted in to make up the numbers needed. The main tools would have been a shovel and wheelbarrow aided by horse and cart. It must have been a miserable task working in the rain with wet heavy clay and large stones on an embankment that might give way at any moment, as well as widening and deepening the cut in the midst of the dangerous water rapidly gushing out the ‘by-wash’. Thankfully there were no casualties. It would have been interesting had some of these men had been interviewed since they may have been better informed as their lives depended on it.

See also the ‘1867 storm, floods and avalanches in the Wicklow Mountains’ by John Murphy and Billy Byrne in *Roundwood Historical Journal* no. 14.

Floods in Derrylossary, 1931

Such events are rare because mountain flooding has decreased in the last 100 years due to the disappearance of annual heavy snow. The most common scenario is the flash flood caused by unusually long or heavy spells of heavy rain in the mountains. When the natural carrying capacity of any stream or river is overloaded water will inundate the surrounding land and cascade down the hillsides. The speed of the water usually causes the most damage as it scours out channels through fields, destroys roads, undermines and tumbles bridges. However it is the lowlands that suffer the most. Black spots are Little Bray, Ashford, and the lower Avonmore River basin, especially where housing has been built on floodplains.

Typical of this type of flood are two of July and September 1931. The first, reported in the *Wicklow People*, 18th July, describes how the Luggelaw road was torn up towards Annacarter and Shramore. Hay, oats and potatoes were submerged in fields off the higher lands of Balislam and Slemaine as the roads were transformed into rivers and fields into lakes. Meadowlands suffered severely in some places. The water also “tore into some of the little cabins that cling to the hillside”, an indication of the state of some of the rural housing that survived in marginal areas. Annacarter School was swamped and teacher and pupils had to climb their desks to escape. Michael Connolly of Knockraheen was congratulated for carrying some of the children to safety.

The flood described by the *Wicklow People*, 12th September, was more serious. The district of Glendalough and Togher suffered severely as a result of the tremendous torrents and floods of the previous Thursday night and Friday morning, though Glendalough was not so pronounced as the Vartry.

“The bridge near the lake, just below Lough Dan school house, a high three arched structure, some thirty feet above the water was damaged to a very dangerous degree. The centre arch collapsed and dropped into the river, a narrow strip about one yard wide remained by which pedestrians could cross”.

After describing the narrow escape of an unnamed motor cyclist (from Dublin, naturally) who fortunately found this strip while crossing on the wrong way to the Sally Gap added that the bridge was built 132 years ago and

“it is doubted that that in all that great span of years if ever such a flow of water passed underneath”.

All vehicle traffic was cut off and Lough Dan residents used the Glendalough House Avenue to get to Roundwood. However, the postman braved the bridge to make his deliveries:

“His crossing over in safety was a risk commented on favourably last Saturday at great personal risk and he was warmly complemented to his faithfulness to duty in the public service, and the G.P.O. should be pleased to learn of his fidelity to duty under such a grave risk of personal injury for the broken bridge is a veritable death trap.”

It helps to know that the reporter, W. J. Duffy, was also a postman himself.

Meanwhile, further down the river:

“The Annamoe Mill was fairly inundated and the occupants Mr. Pat Duffy, his wife and sister in law were trapped. The mill dam gave way, the river overflowed, and the spacious mill yard where the residence stands was flooded to a depth of 4 feet, and higher closer in, flowing in the lower windows. Mr. Barton had cars sent, horses and drays on a rescue expedition back to Annamoe.”

In the meantime Sergeant O’Mahony, Roundwood, and Guard William Organ, Glendalough, arrived and the latter carried the womenfolk to safety through the floods and they found a temporary home in the residence of Mr. James Dunne. The Roundwood sergeant also rendered yeoman service in rescuing cattle, calves and pigs from the flooded outhouses assisted by William Hawkins, the veteran blacksmith of the village. Messrs C. Lattery, Castlekevin, and Michael Brennan senior; Mr. Barton’s carts did gallant work in conducting employees to terra firma.”

On 12th November it was reported the building of a temporary bridge restoring the direct link between Lough Dan and Togher has been constructed with girders, timber, stones and clay. Only one-ton lorries and light cars were allowed to use it but not heavy traffic. It added, within the context of high local unemployment, that

“The cessation of the work is a loss to local labour as the falling of the bridge was a windfall for many.”

From October it was rumoured that there was to be work on the Reservoir. On the 24th it was reported that local labour was still waiting patiently for the start of work on the filtering beds on the Roundwood Reservoir.

“Dozens call daily at the Vartry in hopes of a start. Hope are now warmly entertained that a start will be made during the coming week.”

Deputy Everett promised that “All local lads are to get first chance” and also in an express wish made to the contractor by Senator Alfred Byrne, Lord Mayor of Dublin. However this was delayed for various reasons and rumours of commencement were reported as they surfaced.

A reason that this was a windfall for Lough Dan residents was because, in the beginning of October, “The necessitous cutting down of staff in the service of Mr. C. Barton has given rise to deep concerns amongst many.” Long serving employees were still at risk, one “had been constantly engaged for 17 years”. The remainder of the staff had their wages reduced. Depression in trade and drop in Sterling were blamed as “the root of the evil”. Local residents who had suffered most from the lay-offs and drop in wages welcomed the extra cash.

The recession affected everybody. Small farmers, in particular, were under pressure due to debts owed to the shopkeeper since at that time there was a tied credit relationship between them, money was scarce but there always had to be food on the table. The system was much criticized because the shopkeeper was often seen to be the beneficiary at the expense of the farmer. One example from the time was how a farmer may have to shear his sheep at an unsuitable time to pay off debts. One of W. J. Duffy’s humorous poems (13th June) illustrates that this was also fraught with problems for the shopkeeper.

Wet or dry, however, we’ll try
To wash our sheep – and shear

The fleece of wool from tail to skull
And hope to sell it – dear!
For money is scarce and times getting worse
Enough to make flock owners curse
And shop owners quake with fear.

Consequences of Hurricanes, Great Storms and Floods in Conclusion

The social consequences of weather catastrophes have changed over time. Agriculture, up to the 1950s, was the main source of income therefore flooding was a serious threat to meadows, oat and potato crops, and turf. Before the Land Purchase Acts rents had to be paid and it was up to the landlord to reduce rents, which they usually did on viable farms, but eviction was always an option. After the 1920s farmers had land security but still faced variable yields, usually smallholders and marginal land were most vulnerable. Nowadays agriculture is agribusiness, tillage has declined; farming families have alternative incomes and no longer grow food. Newspapers rarely report land inundations and focus on transport and housing estates indicating changing economic priorities since the 1960s.

There has been a change in the type of housing losses. On one hand, numbers have declined due to the disappearance of the mud wall house, particularly in flood prone areas. However the transition from rural to urban society has concentrated housing in estates and experience has shown that planning has sometimes been poor due to building on flood plains with insufficient safeguards often exacerbated by lack of maintenance. Human-interest stories focus on ruined carpets and furniture indicating the overall rise of wealth and investment in the home in the last 40-50 years.

Relief measures in the 19th century were non-existent and victims relied on charity and subscriptions usually organized by local clergy and gentry but many relied on their neighbours for assistance, particularly when evacuations were necessary. Health Boards and the Irish Red Cross have relieved most affected victims since the early 1900s while local government has been responsible for infrastructure repairs. The Commissioners or Office of Public Works have been responsible for national investment, particularly river drainage since the early 19th century and have been the butt of criticism since.

Compensation dates from the National Emergency of 1954 when from Gort to Swanlinbar was a giant lake and the Shannon three miles wide. The Government robustly defended its refusal to pay compensation with one Roscommon TD saying that it was not legal and “everyone would want it”. It took the collapse of the East Wall railway bridge into the flooded Tolka and the evacuation of 400 households in North Strand to force a U-turn. This was cause for sardonic comment out West with at least another 400 homeless families, destroyed crops, hungry stock, and useless sodden turf.

The main change has been the decline of mortality on sea and land. The disappearance of coastal trade, decline of fishing, safer larger ships, and weather forecasts allied with the spread of the radio has led to a major drop in maritime fatalities. Ship losses were common and make depressing reading in 19th century newspapers; the last storm to have claimed major loss of life was 28th October 1927 when 40 fishermen from Inisbofin, Cleggan Bay, Iniskea and Lackan Bay were lost in a night.

On land there has been a decline in accidental drowning. When the great Shannon floods are compared there may have been over twenty deaths in 1924, about a dozen in 1954, and in 1999, it was less than six.