

THE HISTORY OF THE SCHOOLS IN ATTYMASS PARISH

Hedge Schools

British rule and the introduction of the Penal Laws in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries should have denied an education to the vast majority of children in Ireland. In fact, the resilience of the people ensured that schooling was provided.

Writing in 1940 parish historian and National School teacher Patrick Flannelly writes:

"In the early 16th century, learning and culture were honoured in Ireland, but the destructive warfare of the following two hundred years altered the situation completely....the bards and teachers... were bitterly attacked. They were denounced proscribed and hunted down and their writings were destroyed, their hereditary lands confiscated and their schools disposed. Education was denied the Irish people in their own land..."

The only schools that existed were Protestant and any Catholics that attended them were forced to submit to Reformed Church doctrine.

"...no aid was given by the state to any educational institution ... to which a conscientious Catholic would send the children. Such money as was granted went to schools whose avowed aim was to alter the religion of the children and instruct them in the doctrines of the Reformed Church."

This led to the creation of "Hedge Schools" - schools held illegally, in secret, in broken down cabins, farm buildings or even in the open air. They provided tuition in the Irish language, culture, history and Catholic faith until the formation of the more formal national school system in 1831.

"These small scattered schools were known as 'Hedge Schools' and upon them the great mass of the people depended for their education. They were conducted in defiance of the law and by teachers with a price upon their heads. In these illegal academies the peasantry got all that was left of native culture, its language and literature, its history and legend."

Hedge schools are known to have existed in Attymass parish in the Ballycong, Byhalla, Currower, Curradrish, Graffy, Treenlaur and Kilgellia townships.

Although, in 1788, a Vice Regal Commission suggested reforms allowing the teaching of the Catholic faith, these were largely ignored. However under pressure from the Catholic clergy a second Commission was set up in 1824 to look into the state of the education system in Ireland. Here we find the first historic reference to schools in Attymass.

Irish Education Inquiry 2nd report 1826

"...both the Catholic and Protestant parochial clergy were called upon to furnish a return giving particulars of the various schools in operation in their respective parishes for the year 1824 and it was enjoined that each return should be accompanied by a sworn declaration..."

The report for Attymass reads:

Mullahowney School in connection with the Baptist Society of Ireland was housed in a most miserable thatched cabin. Extracts from the Avowed Version of the Scriptures read daily. Teacher was Michael McDonnell R.C.,

whose salary was about £12.00 per annum. Admission to school was free. Attendance according to protestant return was 4 Protestants and 66 Catholics, but according to the Catholic return, 8 Protestants and 74 Catholics, 52 males and 30 females.

Kilgellia School also in connection with the Baptism Society was housed in "a bad thatched cabin." Avowed Version of Scriptures read daily. Teacher was Eneas McDonnell R.C. whose salary was about £12.00 per annum. Admission to the school was free. Attendance according to Protestant Return was a Protestant and 40 R.C's 26 males and 14 females; but the Catholics Returns gave 0 Protestants and 86 R.C'S, 59 males and 27 females.

Currower School: Not connected to any Society was housed in "a wretched thatched cabin". Not stated whether the Scriptures were read. Teacher was Patrick Diffely R.C. whose rates of charge varied from a penny to four pence per week per pupil. Attendance according to Protestant Return was 0 Protestants and 20 R.C's, 8 males and 12 females, but according to Catholic Returns 0 Protestants and 13 R.C's 9 males and 4 females.

It can be seen from the above returns that the "wretched thatched cabin" that was Currower school, though free from the doctrinal requirement that the Avowed Scriptures be read daily, had by far the lowest attendance. It was the only one of the three not supported by the Baptist Society.

"...the attendance was very small in comparison with that of the other two schools of the parish showing the straits to which the people were reduced, as probably the fee of one penny per pupil per week was even more than they could afford to pay."

National Schools

The findings of the 1824 Commission led to the drafting of the Education Act 1831 and the formation of the National School system though it was some time before it was implemented.

"Attymass, in common with most parishes...did not take advantage of the National Board Scheme for about a decade after it was set in motion. In the Parliamentary Gazetteer of Ireland there is an account of this parish for the year 1834 when three hedge schools were in existence here..."

Mullahowney and Kilgellia schools probably continued as they were for some time after the 1831 act but eventually:

"We may take it...that the Baptism Society...dropped out and that...education came under the supervision of the Catholic Church..."

The Parliamentary Gazetteer of 1834 also mentions the sum of £74/3/4 being granted for the building and setting up of a school in Treenlaur by the National Board. It is thought that this was considered a hedge school and was run by a Mr. Devaney who is known to have taught in other hedge schools in the parish. It seems that Devaney was not actually qualified to teach as he:

"...finished his career in the parish by conducting a hedge school in the church up to 1872, when the first National School was opened in Attymass (or townland of Kilgellia)."

There is an interesting description of Devaney in the Schools Folklore Collection:

"About seventy years ago there was an old schoolmaster called Devaney and this man lived in Graffy. There was an old school in Currower at the same time and in Summer the children of Graffy would go to that school but in Winter it was too far and they went to a barn in Graffy where Devaney taught them. Each child brought him a penny and two sods of turf in the week. Some person in the village gave him lodgings and he got milk from the neighbours also."

Bonnifinglas National School [1876-1971]

Built from parish funds on land donated by landlord Mrs. Perry, the single roomed mixed Bonnifinglas National School opened on the 3rd of July 1876. A two story teachers house was constructed at the same time.

Renovations including the partitioning of the classroom into two and the provision of cloakrooms and a porch were carried out in 1914. The teachers house was demolished in 1948.

Roll books are incomplete but it appears that 601 children attended the school during it's 85 year lifetime.

The building is still standing and has recently been undergoing restoration as a domestic property.



Above left: Front view of Bunnifinglas NS as it appears today showing the porch constructed in 1914. Above right: rear view & yard. Below left: sign on porch. Below right: Outside toilets!



Currower National School [Hedge School pre 1856-1976]

The Hedge School at Currower was either replaced or re-built in 1848 from private funds. It was recognised as a National School in 1856.

In 1894 then PP Fr Connington began construction of a new school on land donated by landlord Mr. McGloin on a site to the East of the old one. The new school opened as a double school - two separate schools under one roof - on the 7th of September 1896.

It was 55ft x 12ft 6" but had a wing afterwards added.

It was amalgamated into one school in January 1929.

It is believed some 1,459 pupils attended during it's time as a NS.



Above: all that remains of the Currower NS. It is understood the building was demolished for insurance reasons.

Derreen National School [1877-1972]

Built from parish funds in 1876 the single roomed mixed Derreen National School opened on 15th January 1877. A two story teachers house was constructed at the same time.

The classroom was divided into two during renovations in 1922. The Congested District Board financed an attached cooking/laundry room to prepare pupils for future employment.

From 1934 became a one teacher school due to small attendance.

501 pupils believed to have attended during it's existence.



Above left: Derreen NS today, updated & used as a holiday home. Above right: the schoolyard showing the wall that divided the girls & boys sections. Below: two views of the derelict two story teachers house. The house would have been extremely imposing in comparison with most contemporary local accommodation.



Attymass National School [Kilgellia] [1872/1879-1976]

The first National School in Kilgellia [Attymass] opened in November 1872 in a "poorly constructed thatched cabin" opposite the church gates. The site was acquired by then PP Fr Hurst - possibly purchased from one Paddy Kavanagh but more likely part of lands gifted by landlord Mrs. G. H. Moore who donated the land on which the church and subsequently the "new" school were constructed. Daniel and Mrs. Henry taught at this location until the completion of the new school building in 1879.

The original school was mixed but the new had separate boys and girls schools consisting of one classroom each. The schools were amalgamated on 1st January 1939.

A total of 2675 children were educated in the two schools up until June 1976 when the school moved to the new location on the opposite side of the road.



The "Old School" now serves as a Community Centre.

Right: internal view of the Old School as it appears today.

There are plans to restore parts of the old building to act as an exhibit demonstrating how schools were in the past.

These plans are part of an ambitious scheme to provide a new Community Centre facility for the



parish to be located on the site of the Old School and lands between it and the church.

St. Feichin's National School, Attymass [1976-present day]

The nine room present school was opened on 14th of September 1976.

* All quotes from P. Flannelly's manuscript The History of The Schools of Attymass from the parish inventory. Tables of teachers serving the schools and more details can be found in the full transcript in the historic documents archive at http://www.attymass.ie/historical_documents

Many of the Roll Books from the four National Schools still exist and are presently stored in the Parish House.