# 5

# The Creation and Evolution of Small Towns in Ulster in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

## W.H. CRAWFORD

FOR THOSE WHO ARE INTERESTED in the development of urban life in the British Isles in the early modern period, the province of Ulster in the north of Ireland presents a thought-provoking case study. Ulster's urban network was created almost from scratch in the early seventeenth century after the final conquest of that province by the English. By 1610 a detailed scheme for the colonisation or Plantation of Ulster had been devised and was rushed into execution. It was soon apparent, however, that the practicalities of the colonial situation would not permit its implementation and the Crown had to allow the 'undertakers' in Ulster much more latitude than it had intended. This British colony was almost destroyed in the warfare of the 1640s and 1650s and its subsequent recovery further disrupted by the Williamite wars between 1688 and 1691. During these decades, however, its whole character was changed as the result of heavy immigration by both English and Scots. Because they were required to pay cash rents, these immigrants adopted a more commercial approach towards fairs and markets and in the longer term developed a very successful domestic linen industry which, in turn, transformed both the economy and society of the province.

Before another century had passed, various travellers had recorded their surprise at the populousness and prosperity of the province, the diversity of its linen industry, the extent of both hedged and walled enclosures, the quality of its towns, markets and fairs, and its extensive road network. The province of Ulster might well have been described as 'the best poor man's country' if its inhabitants had not already been given that impression of the American colonies. The Ulster climate may have been damp but rarely did it kill with cold. Shelter was easily constructed from rocks, sods, heather and thatch. Turf warmed the families and cooked their food while the potato was prolific and nourishing. The consequence was that the province by 1800 supported a population little short of that of Scotland.[1]

---

[1] According to the 1821 census the population of all Scotland numbered 2,091,000 (T.C. Smout, *A History of the Scottish People, 1560–1830*, London, 1969, p. 259) while that of Ulster was 1,998,494 (W.E. Vaughan and A.J. Fitzpatrick, eds, *Irish Historical Statistics: Population, 1821–1971*, Dublin, 1978, p. 16).

Great application and energy was displayed by the rural population, under the supervision of the landlords and entrepreneurs, in the reclamation of vast areas of marginal land and the construction of a great network of roads, as intensive as anything in Western Europe.

In these circumstances it is particularly worthwhile to examine the functions and significance of the towns. The most surprising fact is the large number of small towns for which royal grants of market rights were purchased. Each market town represented at least one of the estates or manors into which the country had been divided by the government, although many of the manors proved too small and too poor to support a town of any size. In six of the nine counties estates had been allocated containing 1,000 to 2,000 Irish Plantation acres (equal to 1,600 to 3,200 statute acres, or 650–1,300 hectares) of profitable land. Few of them would have exceeded 12,000 statute acres (4,860 hectares) of land of mixed quality unless they had swallowed a neighbouring estate. Their sizes contrasted sharply with those of contemporary towns in England, for example, where the average hinterland for a market town was 45,000 acres (18,225 hectares), or in Wales, where the average was over 100,000 acres (40,000 hectares).[2] Nevertheless, many Ulster towns were quite successful—by Irish standards in the eighteenth century— because they were able to establish their fairs and markets, and as a result to benefit from the expansion of the British economy by generating local crafts and industries. Only Belfast, however, the largest and most prosperous town and port in the province, was beginning to grow quickly before 1800.

## Estates and towns

The Plantation scheme drawn up between 1607 and 1610 involved six of the nine counties of Ulster. Under its terms the Crown granted to British 'undertakers' and officials, as well as 'loyal Irishmen' estates of 1,000, 1,500 and 2,000 Plantation acres of profitable land (the Irish Plantation acre was equal to 1.6 statute acres). For these estates they paid quit rents of twopence per acre.[3] By their patents from the Crown, these new landowners were granted authority over the communities on their estates. The Crown instituted a system of landholding that retained some of the elements of feudal tenure and by setting aside the statute of *Quia emptores* of 1290, it introduced also a manorial system with tenants bound 'to do suit at' (that is, they were required to attend and use) the manor courts and mills.[4] The compact nature of these fairly extensive estates enabled a landlord to fix his headquarters in a suitable location and to

---

[2] A. Everitt, 'The marketing of agricultural produce' in J. Thirsk, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales IV: 1500–1640* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 496–8.

[3] W.A. Maguire, *The Downshire estates in Ireland, 1800–1845* (Oxford, 1972), p. 20.

[4] J.C.W. Wylie, *Irish Land Law* (London, 1975), pp. 63–7; see also W.H. Crawford, 'The significance of landed estates in Ulster, 1600–1820', *Irish Economic and Social History*, 17 (1990), 44–61.

promote this settlement as his town by taking out a patent for weekly markets and seasonal fairs. Although in the counties of Antrim and Down several estates were more considerable, there was no obvious correlation between the size of estates and the success of their towns: location was to prove a more important factor.

In its Plantation scheme, the London government expressed its conviction that towns, especially corporate towns on the English model, could play a vital role in civilising Ulster society. They would not only provide protection for their communities and sustain markets and fairs but also introduce new standards of local administration and even 'the urban mentality' that Ulster did not know. The government changed its mind several times about the choice of suitable strategic sites across the province. It finally decided to create up to twenty-eight corporate towns whose representatives could be used also to establish a Protestant majority in the Irish Parliament. This network of corporate towns would underpin the structure of the Plantation. At an early stage, however, the government realised that it would never be able to recruit enough burgesses to establish these towns, unless it impressed or coerced British tradesmen and artificers. Accordingly, it unloaded its responsibility onto the landlords of adjacent estates by making them patrons of the embryo towns.[5] By taking this course the government 'militated against substantial concentrated urban growth by prescribing a settlement pattern to be based on landlord villages on each undertaker's estate', as Hunter has stressed.[6] In effect the government rescinded its proposal to sponsor the new boroughs and gave these landlords not only control of the corporations but also the power to hold manor courts, both courts leet and courts baron, with authority to organise and administer markets and fairs, collecting all relevant fines, leet-silver, and tolls as well as ground rents. The whole character of the Plantation had been changed and Ulster had no corporate towns to emulate Dublin or Cork in providing leadership for their respective provinces.

Information about the size of the Ulster boroughs in 1800 can be extracted from returns compiled for the Irish House of Commons about the boroughs sending members to parliament on the eve of the Act of Union (Table 5.1).[7] These returns detail the total number of houses and the actual amount of tax paid by each borough, and they also distinguish the numbers of houses eligible to pay hearth tax from those that were exempt. An act of 1794 exempted occupiers of houses each containing not more than one hearth, and not holding any property worth more than £5 per year or goods valued at more than £10. The intention was to exempt the artisan class in the towns as well as the cottiers and rural labourers in the countryside. By 1800 Belfast had a population of about 20,000 and so Newry would have had about 10,000 and Londonderry about 8,000. Between them these three ports paid about half of all the hearth tax paid by the Ulster boroughs.

[5] R.J. Hunter, 'Towns in the Ulster Plantation', *Studia Hibernica*, 11 (1971), 40–78.
[6] R.J. Hunter, 'Ulster Plantation towns, 1609–41' in D. Harkness and M. O'Dowd, *The Town in Ireland* (Belfast, 1981), p. 62.
[7] Ulster figures extracted from figures published in *Journals of the House of Commons of Ireland*, 1800, Appendix, dccclxix–dccclxxii.

*W.H. Crawford*

**Table 5.1.** Hearth Money returns for Ulster boroughs for year ending 1800.

| Name of borough | Total houses | Houses paying tax | | | Houses exempt from tax | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | No. | Total £ | Average £ | No. | % |
| Belfast | 3,053 | 1,298 | 841 | 0.65 | 1,755 | 57 |
| Newry | 1,503 | 542 | 361 | 0.67 | 961 | 64 |
| Londonderry | 1,154 | 478 | 353 | 0.74 | 676 | 59 |
| Armagh | 834 | 341 | 218 | 0.64 | 493 | 59 |
| Coleraine | 833 | 223 | 112 | 0.5 | 610 | 73 |
| Lisburn | 802 | 270 | 174 | 0.64 | 532 | 66 |
| Downpatrick | 678 | 223 | 129 | 0.58 | 455 | 67 |
| Newtownards | 499 | 95 | 33 | 0.38 | 404 | 81 |
| Strabane | 481 | 167 | 108 | 0.65 | 314 | 65 |
| Carrickfergus | 475 | 103 | 48 | 0.47 | 372 | 78 |
| Monaghan | 471 | 164 | 82 | 0.5 | 307 | 65 |
| Dungannon | 384 | 223 | 134 | 0.6 | 161 | 42 |
| Antrim | 382 | 81 | 40 | 0.49 | 301 | 79 |
| Enniskillen | 367 | 181 | 123 | 0.68 | 186 | 51 |
| Bangor | 284 | 40 | 38 | 0.95 | 244 | 86 |
| N'Limavady | 240 | 88 | 39 | 0.44 | 152 | 63 |
| Cavan | 224 | 93 | 51 | 0.55 | 131 | 58 |
| Belturbet | 209 | 83 | 33 | 0.4 | 126 | 60 |
| Ballyshannon | 198 | 77 | 42 | 0.55 | 121 | 61 |
| Hillsborough | 159 | 78 | 66 | 0.85 | 81 | 51 |
| Augher | 126 | 17 | 12 | 0.71 | 109 | 87 |
| Killyleagh | 119 | 10 | 5 | 0.5 | 109 | 92 |
| Lifford | 93 | 32 | 22 | 0.69 | 61 | 66 |
| Charlemont | 64 | 12 | 3 | 0.25 | 52 | 81 |
| Donegal | 58 | 29 | 11 | 0.38 | 29 | 50 |
| Killybegs | 55 | 16 | 4 | 0.25 | 39 | 71 |
| St Johnstown | 51 | 17 | 5 | 0.29 | 34 | 67 |
| Randalstown | 51 | 10 | 5 | 0.5 | 41 | 80 |
| Clogher | 39 | 11 | 19 | 1.73 | 28 | 72 |
| All Ulster boroughs | 13,886 | 5,002 | 3,111 | 0.62 | 8,884 | 62 |

Comparison of this list of boroughs with the returns for the 1821 census (Table 5.2) reveals that out of the twenty-seven towns in Ulster that contained more than 2,000 people each in 1821, nineteen are on this list (Figure 5.1).[8] In order of their 1821 magnitude those eight towns that were not boroughs were Donaghadee, Ballymena, Lurgan, Larne, Letterkenny, Clones, Cootehill and Omagh. The first five were all about the size of Bangor while the last three were similar to Cavan. It is unlikely that any of them had a population of more than two thousand in 1800 although Donaghadee and Lurgan may have been close to that figure. This produces the ranking list shown in

[8] Vaughan and Fitzpatrick, *Irish Historical Statistics: Population*, pp. 36–9.

**Table 5.2.** Ulster towns with more than 2,000 population in 1821.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Belfast | 10. Carrickfergus | 19. [Letterkenny] |
| 2. Newry | 11. Monaghan | 20. [Ballymena] |
| 3. Londonderry | 12. Dungannon | 21. N'Limavady |
| 4. Armagh | 13. Antrim | 22. Cavan |
| 5. Coleraine | 14. Enniskillen | 23. [Clones] |
| 6. Lisburn | 15. Bangor | 24. [Cootehill] |
| 7. Downpatrick | 16. [Donaghadee] | 25. [Omagh] |
| 8. Newtownards | 17. [Lurgan] | 26. Belturbet |
| 9. Strabane | 18. [Larne] | 27. Ballyshannon |

*Note:* Towns are listed in order of size; those in brackets are non-boroughs.

Table 5.2 for the most considerable Ulster towns in 1800. All the Ulster corporate towns, with the exception of Londonderry, became estate towns, although in their right to send members to parliament they differed from seigneurial boroughs in England. When the corporations of most of the new Ulster boroughs were granted the right to select two members to represent them in the Dublin parliament, their landlords packed the corporations with their kin and supporters who could be relied upon to carry out their instructions and vote for their nominees. This device of bringing in non-residents as burgesses and freemen to maintain control of corporations was confirmed by a clause in an act of parliament in 1748 (subsequently known as the Newtown Act).[9]

It has been suggested that 'this absence of a resident political oligarchy enabled many local landlords to consolidate their political influence, gained by being able to nominate the first twelve burgesses, which in some areas provided a stabilising influence on urban political life'.[10] Control over their boroughs was enhanced for the landlords by the exercise through the corporation of an unlimited power of conferring or refusing freedom. The legality of this practice went unchallenged until 1824, when it was confirmed by the case of the Crown against the Corporation of Sligo.[11] Malcomson has gone further in championing landlord control. Referring to the Abercorn lords who controlled the borough of Strabane in County Tyrone from the plantation to the Act of Union in 1800, he argues: 'There was an important sense in which they remained the patrons of Strabane even during the period of their temporary loss of political influence in it from 1733 to 1764; they remained the patrons in that they were ground landlord, town-planner, promoter of trade and industry and source of what social security there was'.[12]

---

[9] A.P.W. Malcomson, 'The Newtown Act: revision and reconstruction', *Irish Historical Studies,* 18 (1973), 313–44.
[10] R. Gillespie, 'The origins and development of an Ulster urban network, 1600–41', *Irish Historical Studies,* 24 (1984), 22.
[11] Irish law reports: Fox & Smith's Reports, King's Bench Reports, 1822–4, vol. II, pp. 96–105.
[12] A.P.W. Malcomson, 'The politics of "natural right": the Abercorn family and Strabane borough, 1692–1800' in G.A. Hayes-McCoy, ed., *Historical Studies X* (Galway, 1976), p. 78.
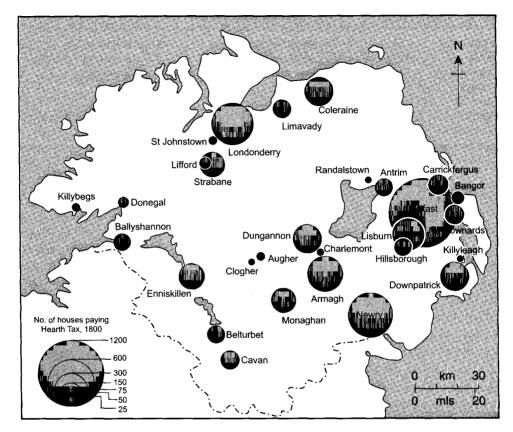
**Figure 5.1.** Ulster boroughs, *c*.1800 (those with over 2,000 population in 1821 are shown by name).

When landlords or their local agents were interested and active in promoting the welfare of their towns, there was much to be said in favour of patrician rule. Landlords represented the interests of their towns in parliament and county grand jury, and championed them against interference from clerics, lawyers and neighbouring landlords. Where corporations did not exist, however, landlords—or, in their absence, their agents—had to devise or adopt patterns of local government to deal with local problems and emergencies, pay attention to the welfare of the inhabitants, and keep a weather eye on their moods. The landlord nominated the sovereign of the town (variously known also as the portreeve or provost) who, especially in the west of the province, played a dominant role in local government. In Strabane, the Abercorn agent assumed the role. In the east of the province a commoner practice was for the sovereign or the seneschal of the manor to summon a jury of the tenants to attend a manor court or court-leet twice a year. Its role was to adjudicate on quarrels and complaints within the manor and to frame arrangements for markets and fairs and

anything else that might affect the community. In the larger towns the court-leet selected a market jury and sometimes nominated individual officers to inspect the various markets in the interest of the inhabitants of the town. In Newtownards, for example, the 'quarter court', summoned once a year and composed of twenty-three inhabitants sworn as grand jurors, elected the constable, the applotter or assessor, appraisers, viewers of weights and measures, the coal measure viewer, meal and grain viewers, malt viewers, viewers of flesh, tallow, and hides, ditch viewers, street viewers, the yarn gauger, cloth and yarn viewers, the market clerk, and the Troner or public weighmaster.[13]

The number of officers that any town could afford was limited by its financial resources and, unfortunately, the Crown had not granted any land to any of the newly-established Ulster towns. As Gillespie has pointed out: 'This lack of land deprived the towns of a major source of income as up to fifty per cent of the income of an English town was derived from its lands. Thus, schemes which English towns could afford, such as local poor relief, could not be implemented in Ulster for lack of funds'.[14] Some of the Ulster towns tried to devise means of raising finance to pay fees and salaries. The most obvious course was to enclose the town common, if one had survived, and then lease the farms. Others used tolls and customs. In Strabane in 1741 the corporation decided to apply fees levied for the making of freedoms, quarterage (a charge on those who did not take out their freedoms, usually Catholics) and fines, 'to such uses as the freemen etc. should appoint', and the money was used to light the town and employ four watchmen.[15] By the 1780s, however, the payment of quarterage throughout Ireland could no longer be enforced in law and was abandoned by corporations.[16] In the last resort, therefore, the quality of town government depended on the interest of the patron in the welfare of his town, and his generosity.

The major weakness of the manor court as an instrument of local government was that it had no legal authority to raise money from the inhabitants and depended on their goodwill and public spirit to do so. The parish vestry of the established Church of Ireland, on the other hand, had the right to raise a parish cess or rate from people of all religious persuasions. In the late eighteenth century, however, when attempts were made in Belfast to use the parish vestry to raise more money to finance a wider range of local projects, they failed when challenged by the inhabitants. In Belfast, bodies of townspeople had begun to initiate improvement schemes for the provision of fresh water, poor relief, health, commerce and education. The earls of Donegall

---

[13] PP 1835, XXVIII, p. 516, *First Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Municipal Corporations in Ireland* (hereafter referred to as *Municipal Corporations Report*), Appendix, Part II, 958.
[14] Gillespie, 'Origins', p. 20.
[15] PRONI, Abercorn estate papers, D/623/A/36/126, James Hamilton to the earl of Abercorn, 17 May 1765.
[16] M. MacGeehan, 'The Catholics of the towns and the quarterage dispute in eighteenth-century Ireland', *Irish Historical Studies*, 8 (1952), 91–114.

(marquesses from 1799), although lords of the manor, were not sound enough finan-cially either to take control of the schemes or prevent them. They had therefore to support the campaign which made Belfast the first town in Ulster to obtain a Police Act giving an elected body responsibility for paving, lighting and cleansing the town and providing it with a fire service and a night watch.[17] The initiative had passed from the landlord to the inhabitants. Although Newry tried twice to obtain a similar act, it failed, and similar provisions were not extended to other towns in Ulster until 1828.[18] In Londonderry the independent corporation did raise finance for the development of the harbour as well as the construction of a toll bridge to replace the ferry across the broad River Foyle in 1791, but it fell so heavily into debt that government had to transfer these responsibilities to a new Londonderry Bridge corporation by an act of 1835.[19]

These examples suggest that the Crown's failure to create a network of corporate towns in Ulster impaired the economic and social development of towns in Ulster. On the other hand it could be argued that wherever groups of townspeople did acquire authority, they used it to promote their own interests. In Strabane an oligarchy in the corporation had held Abercorn at bay in his own town for twenty years while they enjoyed the perquisites.[20] Even more culpable were those guilds that had been instituted in Londonderry and Carrickfergus, for they fought hard to preserve their privileges. A 'fraternity of trade' set up in 1735 in Londonderry 'to prevent the trading of persons not freemen', was said to have exercised considerable political influence: it 'declined when the monopoly of exclusive trading, formerly enjoyed by freemen, wore gradually away'[21] and ceased to exist before the close of the century. In the ancient walled town of Carrickfergus, too, several guilds were established: tailors and glovers (in 1670), hammermen (1748), weavers (1783), carters (1814), butchers, trawlers and dredgers, hookers, and shoemakers (or cordwainers). The deterioration in the character of these guilds was described in an 1835 report on the weavers' guild:

> The guild met twice in the year; the purpose is stated to be 'to drink the amount of the entrance fees.' When trade was good, there was a third meeting, held on St Patrick's day, for the same purpose. Freedom of the corporation, inhabitancy, or even belonging to the trade, is considered unnecessary as qualifications for admission. The number in the guild is 120. The business of the trade is never discussed at any meeting, and any bye-laws passed for its regulation are now disregarded.[22]

It cannot be emphasised too strongly that in Ulster the creation and development of the majority of the towns reflected the initiative and perseverance of many landlords

---

[17] Belfast's act was 40 Geo. III c. 37. See W.A. Maguire, *Belfast* (Keele, 1993), pp. 40–1.
[18] Other Ulster towns gained their powers from 9 Geo. IV c. 82 (1828).
[19] T. Colby, *Ordnance Survey Memoir of the parish of Templemore* (Dublin, 1837), pp. 130–1.
[20] Malcomson, 'Politics of "natural right": the Abercorn family', pp. 43–90.
[21] PP 1836, xxiv, *Municipal Corporations Report,* Appendix, Part III, p. 1115.
[22] PP 1835, xxviii, *Municipal Corporations Report*, Appendix, Part I, p. 759.

and their agents. Success depended on their readiness to seize the tide of immigration and to attract potential tenants by providing and maintaining the facilities they required. They had to resurrect their projects after the 1641 Rebellion and the Williamite Wars and adapt their experiences of urban life in Britain to cope with the problems of a new colony.

## Layout of towns

The only two towns in Ulster provided with town walls as a result of the Plantation project were the port towns of Londonderry and Coleraine. Both these settlements were sponsored by the Honourable the Irish Society, the title given to a consortium of London guilds required by King James I to invest in the plantation of the new county of Londonderry. It has been observed that Londonderry and Coleraine were the last of the English medieval planned towns and they retained the characteristic grid pattern of streets.[23] Nevertheless, as Thomas has pointed out, the context of more than fifty Irish walled towns 'highlights the essential simplicity of Coleraine and Londonderry as defended settlements'.[24] As both of them withstood significant sieges in defence of the British colony during the seventeenth century, it might at first seem surprising that they were the only walled towns built in Ulster. It was, however, no more than another indication of the poverty of the Plantation economy.

In contrast with Londonderry and Coleraine, the other new towns were open and undefended, relying on the landlord's castle and bawn (enclosed yard) to protect the inhabitants from attack. On greenfield sites they adopted the basic English concept of burgage plots (referred to in Ulster as 'tenements') laid out on either side of a broad main street.[25] The landlord allocated 'tenements' and calculated the ground rents for them according to location and street frontage. The site and shape of the market-place was dictated by the amount of level land available and the natural routes that converged on it, and the parish church was often built in its vicinity. On each of the tenements the construction of houses was done by the tenants at their own charge although in the seventeenth century the landlord usually granted the tenants 'estovers'—timber for building ('house boot'), for fuel ('fire boot') and for making ploughs ('plough boot'). In time, competition for sites around the market places led to the subdivision of tenements and occasionally to encroachments on the market-place, although such infilling was rare in Ulster. Entry to the deep backs of the tenements was through archways from the

---

[23] M.W. Beresford, *New Towns of the Middle Ages* (Lutterworth, 1967), pp. 311–12.
[24] A. Thomas, 'Londonderry and Coleraine: walled towns, epitome or exception' in G. O'Brien, *Derry and Londonderry: History and Society* (Dublin, 1999), p. 264.
[25] C. Platt, *The English Medieval Town* (London, 1976), pp. 50–5; M. Aston and J. Bond, *The Landscape of Towns* (London, 1976), pp. 87, 98–9; R.J. Naismith, *The Story of Scotland's Towns* (Edinburgh, 1989), pp. 18, 27.

main street and they have become a distinctive feature of these towns in the absence of
back access. All kinds of industries and crafts, as well as farming, were carried on in
the backs of the tenements.[26]

In the initial Plantation project the Crown had decreed that landlords should grant
leases to their tenants to hold property by any tenure then common in England. To
attract and retain British tenants, when they were in short supply, landlords had to
offer good terms. Although some landlords did build houses on their own initiative,
especially in the early years of the Plantation, the general practice of landlords was
to lease the land for building on terms of three lives renewable. When any of the lives
named in such a lease died, the tenant had the right to renew the lease by paying a
year's rent and inserting a new name in place of the deceased. In granting such a lease
the landlord gave up effective control over the property, as Wylie has concluded: 'The
Irish courts recognised that the estate given to the tenant was potentially perpetual'.
Even if the tenant did not pay the rent, the landlord could neither take distress
against him nor re-enter the premises but only sue him for debt. In view of the extent
of this security for the tenant, it is not surprising to find that such properties were
bought up by those who wished to invest money. In turn they sublet the properties for
terms of years.[27]

Although the majority of urban leases in the early years of the Plantation were for
terms of years, by the close of the seventeenth century the three-lives renewable lease
had become the standard lease in many Ulster towns. By referring to such leases as
'copyhold' in the leasebook of his estate in north Armagh, Arthur Brownlow reveals
that contemporaries were confused about the whole subject of tenures.[28] The preva-
lence of this kind of lease was responsible for the fact that the destruction of Lisburn
by fire in 1707 did not lead to any significant alteration in the original layout of that
town because new brick houses replaced the timber houses on the very same tenements.
Many other Ulster towns still retain much of their original layout. For a time Belfast
had a different experience, however, as properties there had been leased in the 1690s for
forty-one or sixty-one years. The consequence was that the prosperity of the town suf-
fered in the mid-eighteenth century when the landlord was incapable of administering
the estate. Belfast was said to be 'in a ruinous condition' and would 'lose both its trade
and inhabitants if it is not speedily supported by proper tenures'.[29] On the grant of new
leases, however, Belfast too acquired three-lives renewable leases like the other Ulster
towns.

---

[26] See R. Gillespie, *Settlement and Survival on an Ulster Estate: the Brownlow Leasebook, 1667–1711* (Belfast,
1988), especially pp. xxxix–xliv.

[27] W.H. Crawford, 'Landlord–tenant relations in Ulster, 1609–1820', *Irish Economic and Social History*, 2 (1975),
5–21. See a detailed explanation of the significance of leases for three lives renewable in Wylie, *Irish Land Law*, pp.
222–7.

[28] Gillespie, *Settlement and Survival*, pp. lv, 87, 134. See Wylie, *Irish Land Law*, pp. 58–60, especially fn. 70 on p. 60.

[29] G. Benn, *History of the Town of Belfast, from the Earliest Times to the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1877), p.
535.

Landlords were prepared to concede such terms to attract tenants who would build substantial dwellings. Although they obtained only a small, fixed income from ground rents, they hoped to profit by leasing to those townspeople who engaged in farming, parks or parcels of land in the 'town parks' which adjoined the towns, for terms of twenty-one years.[30] Competition for town parks would increase the estate rental. Few towns had commons, and in time they found them a liability because they attracted squatters, so that in Lifford, for example, the landlord in 1751 divided and allocated the commons in fee farm among the descendants of the original twelve burgesses of the borough.[31]

In the Plantation project the Crown had insisted that undertakers should make leases in the new towns only to 'Brittains' and not 'to meer Irish'. Even in the late eighteenth century these perpetuity leases still restricted town properties to British tenants. This prohibition, however, did not apply to those towns that had developed on Church lands such as Armagh and Newry, where landlords were glad to take Irish tenants.[32] In Armagh, for example, British settlement was so sparse that in 1627 Archbishop Ussher had to lease thirty-eight properties on twenty-one year leases to twenty-five British and thirteen Irish tenants.[33] Poorer Irish who could not afford leases held their property as subtenants and their cottages were strung along the main roads entering the towns or in the backsides of the tenements. After the Williamite Wars (1688–91) penal laws against Catholics, which prevented them from holding leases longer than thirty-one years, ensured that they held little urban property in Ulster. Not until the 1782 Catholic Relief Act were Catholics permitted to hold land on the same terms as Protestants, but this act did give them the opportunity to participate in the expansion of Ulster towns during the half century that followed.[34]

## Trade in cattle and linen

The major factor in the success of any new town was its market. Before a landlord could set up a market, however, he had to apply for (or sue out) a royal patent in Dublin, which involved him in some expense and the payment of an annual quit-rent

---

[30] PRONI, Barrett–Lennard correspondence, T/2529/236, Thomas Noble to the Rt Hon. Lord Dacre, 5 January 1771.

[31] PRONI, Erne estate papers, D/1939/18/6/9, Records of Court of Common Council of Lifford, 1716–83.

[32] Gillespie, 'Origins', 25; Gillespie, *Settlement and Survival, passim* but esp. pp. 14, 28, 35, 106, 110, 129; G. Hill, *An Historical Account of the Plantation in Ulster at the Commencement of the Seventeenth Century, 1608–20* (Belfast, 1877), quotation at p. 83; Hunter, 'Ulster Plantation towns, 1609–41', p. 60. See also T.W. Moody, 'The treatment of the native population under the scheme for the plantation in Ulster', *Irish Historical Studies*, 1 (1938–9), 59–63: 'on receiving new title on the King's terms they should be permitted to have as tenants on one quarter of their lands such natives as would conform to the established church and take the oath of allegiance'.

[33] Hunter, 'Towns in Ulster Plantation', 63.

[34] PRONI, Barrett–Lennard correspondence, T/2529/257, William Mayne to Anne, Lady Dacre, 25 June 1792.

to the Crown. He was required to take responsibility for organising and administering both the fairs and markets, to appoint a weighmaster,[35] to provide beams, scales and weights[36] and to ensure that the weights and measures used within the town adjusted to the standard weights and measures which he himself was required to hold. In return he gained the tolls and customs as well as the fines from the court of piepowder where cases arising from the fairs and markets were adjudicated.

Although the records of the Quit-rent Office confirm that many landlords in the early years of the Plantation did obtain patents for weekly markets and periodic fairs, the indication is that many of these settlements did not survive the years of unrest that followed the outbreak of the 1641 rising. Gillespie reckons that about twenty-three per cent of all grants made before the mid-1680s were still operating in 1685.[37] The original dates chosen by landlords for fairs tended to fall in the summer and autumn seasons, following the English custom, but they did not take account of the cattle trade which needed markets in May when the grass began to grow, and in November when it was necessary to sell off stock. By the late seventeenth century, therefore, although the number of new patents was much fewer than in the early years of the Plantation, landlords usually nominated four seasonal fairs every year and the commonest months were March, May, September and November. The fact that most of the new settlements lay on significant cross-country routes, as well as on the major routes from Dublin, suggests that there was, even then, a noticeable expansion of commerce.[38] This impression is confirmed by the issue of trade tokens as small change by about two hundred Ulster merchants in the years between 1656 and 1678.[39] Although towns throughout Ulster were reported to have suffered at the hands of the respective armies during the Williamite wars from 1688 to 1691, they appear to have recovered relatively quickly.

In Ireland, entries in almanacs for the dates of fairs indicate that even from early in the eighteenth century the government made little or no effort to supervise their organisation and administration. In towns that had patents, new dates for fairs were often introduced without reference to any legal authority. The agent for the Abercorn estate in the counties of Tyrone and Donegal, for example, explained to his master how he had organised the selection of dates for new fairs:

> The two old fairs at Magheracreggan are held the 6 May and 24 November. The people first chose for the new fairs 18 December, 7 June, 27 July, 29 October. I advised the First Thursday before St Thomas's day; the Thursday after the King's Birthday; the Thursday before St James's day; and Thursday after the King's Accession. They now choose them to be the 1st Thursday in

---

[35] For weighmasters, see 4 Anne c. 14 s.3 (1705).
[36] Enacted in 25 Geo. II c. 15 s.6 (1751).
[37] R. Gillespie, 'The small towns of Ulster, 1600–1700', *Ulster Folklife*, 36 (1990), 26; P.S. Robinson, *The Plantation of Ulster* (Dublin, 1984), pp. 158–64.
[38] PP 1854–5, xix, Appendix to the *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the State of the Fairs and Markets in Ireland*. The report itself is published in PP 1852–3, xli.
[39] P. Seaby, *Coins and Tokens of Ireland* (London, 1970), pp. 107–34.

June, 2ⁿᵈ in August, 3ʳᵈ in October; and 4ᵗʰ in December. We had a very good fair the 18ᵗʰ December just upon its being proclaimed the market before and spread about the people but if our days for the future were fixed, we think of getting some advertisements printed, and to give notice that there will be a cloth market, and as June is a high time for buying, perhaps it may take and continue for the other five days.[40]

In these circumstances patents for new markets or fairs were taken out by those landlords who wanted to reinvigorate existing towns or to found new settlements. They often announced their intentions in the newspapers. It was noted, for example, in the mid-1740s about Scarvagh Bridge on the new Newry Navigation: 'Mr Reily has a view of forming a village near this bridge, where coalyards and store houses are preparing, and for this end has obtained a patent for fairs and markets'.[41]

Owners of fairs who felt threatened by competition from their neighbours could seek redress from the courts on a writ of *Quo warranto*. Nevertheless, if ever there had been any discipline in the administration of markets and fairs in Ireland, it had certainly disappeared by the mid-nineteenth century when a parliamentary commission on Ireland in 1853 reported:

> Markets are, at present, held in 349 towns and villages in Ireland. In 125 instances no patents can be discovered authorising the holding of markets; and in 103 towns, as to which patents exist, the markets are held on different days from those mentioned in the grants. Fairs are held at 1,297 different towns and places in Ireland. In 485 instances no patents can be traced, and in 324 the fairs are held on other days than those granted by the patent.[42]

When local worthies were questioned by the commissioners about the authority by which these fairs were held, they invariably ascribed the extra dates to prescription or 'ancient custom'. The most important factor in increasing the number of fairs was the cattle trade, especially after the London government lifted the embargo on the export of Irish cattle to Britain in 1758. Many small market towns were not substantial enough to host weekly, or even fortnightly, markets but they proved to be ideal collecting points for cattle, and so monthly fairs began to be advertised in the almanacs and newspapers. By the close of the eighteenth century in many towns the dates of these monthly fairs were being consolidated in relation to the weekly markets so that, for example, the 'fair day' might be the third Friday in every month where the weekly market was held on Fridays.

Legislation in the Irish Parliament also began to play a role in defining the status of towns. An act of 1739, designed to prevent landowners from using public funds to further their own projects, restricted the construction of main roads to direct alignments between market towns.[43] This act increased in significance when the new Road Act of

---

[40] PRONI, Abercorn estate papers, D.623/A/43/82, James Hamilton, Strabane, to the earl of Abercorn, 9 Jan 1778.
[41] W. Harris, *The Antient and Present State of the County of Down* (Dublin, 1744), p. 84.
[42] PP 1852–3, XLI, *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the State of the Fairs and Markets in Ireland*.
[43] The act was 13 Geo. II c. 10 (1739).

1765 placed the construction and maintenance of all main roads under the county grand jury, and subsequently county maps were commissioned to illustrate their alignment.[44] When an act of 1772 confined the practice of distilling to corporate and market towns in order to control the industry more effectively and prevent illicit distillation, the commissioners inquired into the condition of the smaller market towns in order to suppress their stills 'if found not for the good of the revenue'.[45] A consequence of this act in west Ulster was the disappearance of the supervised industry and the increase of illicit distillation throughout the countryside.

Although mixed farming remained an important part of the Ulster economy, its real prosperity depended on the development of the domestic linen industry and its expansion throughout the province. Flax grew well in the damp Irish climate and its preparation and spinning into yarn provided gainful employment for all the women in a family. Although the weaving of fine linen cloth—such as damask and diaper, and later cambric—was the preserve of skilled craftsmen, farmers supplemented their income from farming by weaving coarser cloths in their spare time and certain districts became noted for different kinds of linens. As early as 1709 linen yarn and cloth had become the principal Irish exports to England. Cloth exports increased from less than half a million yards (or metres) in 1700 to over 38,000,000 by 1800.[46] Yarn exports peaked in 1780 at more than 42,000 hundredweight (2,100 tons).

Many landlords promoted the industry among their tenants and set out to attract buyers and sellers to their towns. The most successful strategy proved to be the provision of facilities such as inns and market-houses (for protection against the weather) and the award of premiums. Linen drapers travelled around the markets to purchase webs of brown linen from the weavers and took them to the bleachers for whitening. Yarn-jobbers travelled considerable distances with yarns that ranged greatly in weight and finish so as to supplement local yarn production by the women in the weavers' households. The trade was regulated by the Linen Board, which laid down quality standards for the spinning and reeling of linen yarns. In the 1760s the board was victorious after a long campaign against the weavers to enforce its regulation that all brown (unbleached) linen cloth should be sold in public markets immediately after inspection by its own sealmasters. The board compromised by employing weavers as brown sealmasters in each market to examine the cloths and stamp them with their personal seals as a guarantee of quality. Errant sealmasters were disciplined and sacked in the knowledge that the board could draw for replacements on a great pool of experienced weavers.[47]

---

[44] J.H. Andrews, *Plantation Acres: An Historical Study of the Irish Land Surveyor and his Maps* (Belfast, 1985), pp. 349–52.

[45] PRONI, Abercorn estate papers D/623/A/40/72, James Hamilton, Strabane, to the earl of Abercorn, 8 Dec 1772; 33 Geo. II c. 9 & c. 10 (1760); 11 & 12 Geo. III c. 7 s.3 (1772).

[46] L.M. Cullen, *Anglo-Irish Trade, 1660–1800* (Manchester, 1968), pp. 58–9.

[47] A. McKernan, 'Contested terrain: the making of a market culture in Ulster linens' in M. Cohen, ed., *The Warp of Ulster's Past* (New York, 1997), pp. 93–109.

As all transactions in these markets were in coin (before the introduction of bank-notes in the early nineteenth century) merchants, shopkeepers, tradesmen and crafts-men hurried to settle in the towns. They also attracted innkeepers whose premises the linen drapers frequented, both for their personal comforts and for temporary accom-modation in which to measure cloth and pay weavers what had been agreed in the bus-tle of the market-place. As the landlords appreciated the profits generated by all this activity, they did their best to ensure that the markets were well administered and the facilities as attractive as they could afford. They built market houses and tried to induce prosperous linen drapers to settle in their towns. An agent in Rathfriland, County Down, advised his mistress in 1764: 'It is well known that manufacturers [*meaning weavers*] are able to pay higher rents and live more comfortably than farmers, and as they by their contiguity to the town must sell their cloths and buy their yarn there, and depend thereon for all necessaries such as clothing, candles, and in great measure for their food, it will greatly promote the market and every branch of trade in the town'.[48]

Attempts to attract skilled weavers to settle in the towns failed. Because of the struc-ture of the domestic linen industry, weavers preferred to take leases for terms of three lives [not renewable] of smallholdings less than ten acres in size convenient to the market towns, in the belief that these smallholdings could maintain their families during a downturn in trade. By 1800 it was estimated that the average size of farms in County Armagh, the hub of domestic linen production, was less than five acres.[49] The bleaching and finishing trades in the linen industry, which depended for their power and water on rivers, also provided seasonal work for rural workers. The rapidly growing population of Ulster, therefore, was not reflected in the size of its towns until the cotton industry with its putting-out system began to develop around Belfast in the final two decades of the eighteenth century.

The expansion of the linen industry in its early years owed much to the Trustees of the Linen and Hempen Manufactures (referred to above as the Linen Board), founded under an act of the Irish parliament in 1711. In 1728 they built the White Linen Hall in Dublin modelled on the market of the Drapers' Company at Blackwell Hall in Lon-don. Dublin merchants acted as factors by purchasing cloth from the northern linen drapers and sending it for sale to Chester or London. In time, however, the northern-ers made more direct contact with buyers in Britain and shipped an increasing propor-tion of their linens through Belfast and Newry. Londonderry had for even longer exported yarn from the north-west of the province to Manchester. In 1783, in conse-quence of a quarrel between the Linen Board and the northern drapers, Newry and Belfast each decided to build their own White Linen Hall. Belfast proved more suc-cessful in organising the necessary support services and secured domination over the industry in the province. Its White Linen Hall became a symbol of its success.[50]

---

[48] W.H. Crawford and B. Trainor, eds, *Aspects of Irish Social History, 1750–1800* (Belfast, 1969), p. 92.
[49] C. Coote, *Statistical Survey of the County of Armagh* (Dublin, 1804), p. 136.
[50] W.H. Crawford, 'The Belfast middle classes in the late eighteenth century' in D. Dickson, D. Keogh and K. Whelan, eds, *The United Irishmen: Republicanism, Radicalism and Rebellion* (Dublin, 1993), pp. 66–8.

## Communications

Even in the early decades of the eighteenth century, the success of the linen industry in stimulating markets and fairs began to strain the expanding road network. The pressure on the roads was increased by a series of bad years from 1728 until 1746, alleviated by the import of great quantities of oatmeal from Leinster into Ulster. This grain was carried on small 'wheel-carrs', with a capacity of four or five hundredweight (200–250 kg), even as far as Coleraine on the north coast.[51] The cost of such an operation was eased somewhat by the completion of the Newry Navigation in 1742. The 18-mile-long canal linking the port of Newry to the Lough Neagh basin was the first major inland canal in the British Isles and was credited with saving many thousands of lives in the famine of 1745. Lough Neagh provided access to much of mid-Ulster through its tributaries for vessels carrying grain and provisions, timber and iron, as well as kelp and potash for bleaching, and imports of flax seed from the American colonies and the Baltic.[52] General stores established at several small ports and landing-places on the lough and its tributaries, from Blackwatertown and Charlemont in the south to Ballyronan and Magherafelt in the north, generated considerable economic activity and afforded an outlet for its commerce.[53] Although the original purpose of the Newry canal had been to supply Dublin with coals from the Tyrone collieries at a cheaper rate than Whitehaven, the quality of the coal limited the sales to a more local market. Newry's domination over the trade of south and mid-Ulster was not challenged until the completion in 1796 of the 27-mile-long Lagan Canal linking Belfast with Lough Neagh.[54]

Although both these canals proved commercially successful, the road network was to prove more important in developing the wealth of the province. In the 1730s the Dublin government had introduced a turnpike system based on the English model but underwritten by public rather than private acts. In Ireland, however, the total mileage created between 1729 and 1837 did not exceed 1,820 miles and the maximum mileage operational in any single year was no more than 1,300 in 1812.[55] The contrast between the success of the turnpike system in England and the stunted system that developed in Ireland emphasised the great lack of capital in Ireland and it compelled the Irish parliament to devise a new strategy.

Roads in Ireland had been maintained by the traditional English requirement of six days' unpaid work each year from every able-bodied inhabitant in each parish. In

---

[51] *The Distressed State of Ireland considered, more particularly with respect to the North, in a letter to a friend* (1740), p. 3.
[52] R. Barton, *A dialogue concerning some things of importance to Ireland, particularly to the county of Ardmagh* (Dublin, 1751), pp. 14–16.
[53] *Belfast News-Letter*, 5 Jan 1768, for Ballyronan plating-mill and store advertisement.
[54] W.A. McCutcheon, *The Canals of the North of Ireland* (London & Dawlish, 1965), ch. 3.
[55] D. Broderick, 'The Irish turnpike road system' (PhD thesis, University of Dublin, 1998), p. 246.

Ulster by the mid-eighteenth century, however, the enforcement of this work by gentry active in the parish vestries provoked popular protest. This was answered by a government resolution to absolve day-labourers from responsibility for working on the roads, thus throwing the onus in Ulster on the small farmers and the farmer–weavers. In the counties of Armagh and Down in particular, a large part of this element in the population styled themselves the Hearts of Oak and tormented local clergy and landlords with parades and demonstrations until 1765, when the Dublin government announced the abolition of the six days' work and its replacement by a county charge, or cess, of a penny an acre. Although this system was to prove revolutionary in the scale of its funding for road and bridge construction, it was little more than an extension of the traditional method of funding bridge construction and local government projects from the county cess.[56]

The introduction of county cess placed more funds at the disposal of grand juries. Their annual income more than trebled between 1775 and 1800 and about three-quarters of this income was spent on roadworks. Because the landlords soon realised the potential of the new system for the improvement of their estates, they or their agents assiduously attended the half-yearly meetings of the grand jury and negotiated to secure grants for road-building and mending. Because payment by the grand jury was not made until the roads had been completed, the gentry had to organise and raise the finance for their projects. Road-making proved to be an excellent way to provide work for the poor and as income from the county cess rose, programmes became more ambitious. A further act of 1772 empowered grand juries to finance the construction of narrow roads through mountainous districts.[57] This far-sighted programme opened up many square miles of marginal lands for settlement and reclamation with potato crops by farmers who could no longer afford to compete for holdings in the lowlands. The landlords of these townlands set out farms bordering on the new roads, which not only provided access but also enabled the farmers to carry in limestone to reduce the acidity of soils in the hill-country. Yet again the landlords seized the opportunity to purchase patents for fairs and markets, advertising their intention to build market towns such as Finntown in mid-Donegal, Churchill in Fermanagh, and Frederickstown (now Greencastle) in Tyrone, and requiring the grand juries to link them with roads to all the neighbouring market towns.[58]

This series of initiatives by the grand juries and the landlords—having started in the north of Ireland and been pushed forward most vigorously there—provided Ulster

---

[56] These paragraphs on roads and bridges are based on W.H. Crawford, 'The construction of the Ulster road network, 1700–1850' in *Papers published for a Symposium on the History of Technology, Science and Society, 1750–1914* held at the University of Ulster in September 1989.

[57] This was 11 & 12 Geo. III c. 20 (1771–2).

[58] The impact of these changes on the Ulster county of Donegal is illustrated in W.H. Crawford, 'The evolution of the urban network', in W. Nolan, L. Ronayne & M. Dunlevy, eds, *Donegal: History and Society* (Dublin, 1995), pp. 390–4.

with an excellent road system before the close of the eighteenth century. The new-found resources encouraged the grand juries also to tackle problems that had appeared previously beyond their capability. In some districts rivers had proved to be the major obstacle to road communications. The development of the Lower Bann valley and especially its western bank, for example, had suffered in this respect. For more than a century, only two bridges—at Coleraine and Portglenone—had served the thirty or so miles that separate Lough Neagh from the Barmouth on the north coast. Since the river was too strong and deep for fording, ferries had to be used to transport goods across the river at several strategic points. Before 1800, new bridges were constructed at Toome, Portglenone, Portna (Kilrea) and Agivey. That at Agivey was modelled on the lines of the very impressive new timber bridge across the River Foyle at Londonderry in 1791, designed and constructed by Lemuel Cox of Boston, Massachusetts.[59]

Information about the improvements in the main roads radiating from Dublin, and in the 'cross roads' used to deliver the mail, was published in the form of strip-maps for the benefit of the general public in Taylor & Skinner's *The Post Roads of Ireland* (Dublin, 1776). Ten years later it was followed by *The Post Chaise Companion or Traveller's Directory* which ran through several editions and promoted the introduction of a system of post-chaises throughout the province. About the turn of the century the Scots cart drawn by the heavy Clydesdale horse began to appear on the roads of the province. It was able to carry a ton against the six-hundredweight (300 kg) capacity of the traditional wheel-carr and soon became the most common transport vehicle throughout Ireland.

By 1800 it was a truism to say that in Ireland all roads led to Dublin, which was by far the largest city in Ireland with a population of almost 200,000. Many of them, however, led also to ports and by 1750 three northern towns, Belfast, Newry and Londonderry, were among the first seven ports in the kingdom. Geography defined their respective spheres of influence. Belfast served the Lagan valley, south County Antrim and north County Down while Newry served south County Down, County Armagh and the Lough Neagh basin, and Londonderry dominated the north-west of the province. The only other ports of real significance were Coleraine, Larne and the packet station of Donaghadee. None of these ports, however, had a modern history longer than the Plantation. Then because their merchants had had little time to develop either dynasties or communities, they lacked the networks of kinsmen and friends or trading partners essential to success. During the seventeenth century they had to rely on the support of the Dublin merchants, especially in their more ambitious ventures. 'By 1700 almost all the factors who handled the goods of Belfast merchants in other trading centres were Scots and Presbyterians. Although they were seen as part of the Scottish trading network, many can be identified as coming from Ulster, and a high proportion of these were from Belfast'.[60] It is significant, too, that the bulk of Belfast merchants after 1650 were

[59]  See footnote 56.
[60]  J. Agnew, *Belfast Merchant Families in the Seventeenth Century* (Dublin, 1996), p. 192.

Scots who claimed descent from gentry families. In 1700 many of the original merchant families still derived the greater part of their income from trade,[61] but by 1750 almost all of them had retired from business to become landed gentry. They had been replaced by a new generation of merchants that had set up in trade in Belfast after 1700.

Even by the late eighteenth century the Belfast merchant class was not extensive. When in 1783 it decided to follow the example of first Glasgow and then Dublin in setting up a chamber of commerce, it managed to muster just fifty-nine members against Dublin's 293.[62] Such merchants dealt in both exports and imports, and expanded their trade from several countries in western Europe to the American colonies and the West Indies. Because their resources were limited, most of them could not afford to lock up their capital either in stocks or credits and so they concentrated mainly on commission business, directed and financed by English importers or exporters.[63] London financial services enabled Irish merchants to trade in the American colonies, which supplied Ulster with fresh flax seed and timber in return for emigrants. In Belfast they were able to set up sugar refineries and also invested money in manufacturing activities such as potteries, glassworks and textile printing concerns.[64]

Newry, it is suggested, 'experienced the most rapid commercial expansion of any Irish town trading with British America' and it maintained that trade until the Revolution, as well as contacts in the West Indies.[65] After that time it failed to compete with Belfast. It was the development of the American trade, too, that transformed the port of Londonderry in the mid-eighteenth century, as a report published in the journals of the Irish House of Commons in 1767 reveals:

> There are at present sixty-seven ships containing 11,000 tons, belonging to the merchants and employed in the trade of Derry, besides foreign vessels. That twenty-nine of said ships are from 200 to 350 tons . . . That the exports in linen, and linen yarn only, amount to £250,000 yearly; that the annual imports, consisting of 10,000 hogsheads of flaxseed, besides rum, sugar, tobacco, timber, and deals . . . That trade is so greatly increased within these last thirty-eight years that His Majesty's revenue is advanced from £7,000 to nearly £30,000 annually.[66]

The development of trade with the American continent tends to obscure another important boost to the Ulster economy in 1759 when the ban on the export of live cattle from Ireland to England was lifted. Over a three-year period in the mid-1780s Ulster exported more than 56,000 cattle, three-quarters through Donaghadee and one-sixth through Newry.[67] This heralded the great expansion of exports of Irish livestock to Britain.

---

[61] *Ibid.*, pp. 53, 58.

[62] Crawford, 'Belfast middle classes', pp. 64–5.

[63] L.M. Cullen, *Anglo-Irish Trade, 1660–1800* (Manchester, 1968), p. 98.

[64] *Ibid.*, p. 92. See also T.M. Truxes, *Irish-American Trade, 1660–1783* (Cambridge, 1988), especially his survey of the trade of the three major Ulster ports on pp. 78–84.

[65] Truxes, *Irish-American Trade*, pp. 82–4.

[66] *Journals of the House of Commons of Ireland*, 8 (1765–72), Appendix clxiii.

[67] W.H. Crawford, 'Change in Ulster in the late eighteenth century', in T. Bartlett and D.W. Hayton, eds, *Penal Era and Golden Age* (Belfast, 1979), pp. 113–36.

## Culture of towns

Even in the late eighteenth century, Ulster provincial society aspired to Dublin manners and tastes, transmitted by the local landlords on their annual retreats to their country seats after the parliamentary season; and their life style was reflected in the advertisements that appeared in the local press. The *Belfast News-Letter* (founded 1738), the *Londonderry-Journal* (1772) and Gordon's *Newry Chronicle and Universal Advertiser* (1777) advertised or reported imports from the Dublin scene, involving everything from theatre companies to fashions, as well as those traditional sports of the aristocracy, horse-racing and cock-fighting. Conviviality rather than religious enthusiasm propagated lodges of freemasonry. In Dublin several lodges had appeared, based on inns, about 1730, but Belfast's first lodge was not warranted until 1748 and freemasonry did not become fashionable in Belfast until the 1780s. By then there were about a hundred lodges throughout the province.[68]

Many of the Ulster towns were merely market towns servicing their own regions but the larger of them had other functions. The county towns hosted the assizes, which attracted the custom of the gentry and the curiosity of others. Some credit for the social development of the county towns in the late eighteenth century was due to the practice of regular parliamentary elections established by the Octennial Act of 1768, and later to the stimulation of political and social life in the province by the Volunteer movement after 1777.[69] Electioneering, county meetings, military reviews and the assizes—all with their attendant diversions of horse-racing, cock-fighting, gambling, assembly-rooms and novel events—enlivened town life. Although such county towns as Lifford, Cavan and Omagh might not have been classed as centres of culture and entertainment, the business they generated employed professional men in the roles of lawyers, public servants, schoolmasters, surveyors and even surgeons to the county infirmaries. Such men established the elements of polite society in the towns, often in the lodges of freemasons. Another element of civility could be found in the cathedral towns of the established church such as Armagh, Londonderry, Lisburn, Raphoe, Dromore (Down), Clogher, and most recently Downpatrick. By 1800 many of the clergy were resident and active in society.[70] They were paralleled by the Presbyterian clergy trained in Scotland, some of whom introduced the intellectual concepts of the Scottish Enlightenment, and by the Catholic clergy, who were becoming rather more assertive as prosperity raised living standards among their people.[71]

---

[68] A. McClelland, 'Amyas Griffith', *Irish Booklore*, 2 (1972), 7–21; P. Crossle, *Irish Masonic Records* (Dublin, 1973), map on p. 15.
[69] P.D.H. Smyth, 'The Volunteers and parliament, 1779–84' in Bartlett and Hayton, *Penal Era and Golden Age*, pp. 113–36.
[70] L.A. Clarkson and E.M. Crawford, *Ways to Wealth: the Cust family of eighteenth-century Armagh* (Belfast, 1985), especially chapter 2: 'Armagh in the eighteenth century'.
[71] W.H. Crawford, 'Ulster as a mirror of the two societies [Irish and Scottish]' in T.M. Devine and D. Dickson, eds, *Ireland and Scotland, 1600–1850* (Edinburgh, 1983), pp. 60–9.

Although Belfast society was strongly influenced by Dublin at this time, it was fundamentally different in character. In Dublin a Roman Catholic majority sustained an Anglo-Irish aristocracy; in Belfast the much smaller population was Presbyterian in character and Scottish in inclination. The several Presbyterian sects had always looked to Scotland for the education of their clergy and even imported religious distinctions that were meaningless in an Ulster context.[72] Yet it was the Presbyterians who introduced from Scotland the concept of the 'dissenting academy'—which they admitted they had copied from England—'where not only the language but those sciences which are of the greatest use in life are taught in a compendious and practical manner.'[73] The Presbyterians wanted a university in Ulster for the training of their clergy, but in its absence several ministers had provided the foundation of a classical education at local schools throughout the province. The raising of admission qualifications both for the Scottish universities and for the Presbyterian ministry in Ulster required more ambitious projects. The opening of Strabane Academy in August 1785, followed by that of Belfast in January 1786, gained widespread support in Presbyterian circles. Both these academies contained schools for 'mathematics, including arithmetic, algebra, geometry, astronomy, navigation, bookkeeping, etc., [and] experimental philosophy in all its branches'.

Several provincial towns had long had schools that taught mathematics—Lifford school could boast such fine land surveyors as William Starrat and later the McCrea brothers among its masters[74]—but the Belfast Academy was designed to cater not only for teenagers but also for adults capable of advanced work. In 1790 Dr Bruce became principal and introduced a course of lectures on chemistry 'suited to the various manufactures that were carried on in the town'. By 1792, however, when these and other courses of lectures had ceased due to lack of support, the concept of a collegiate course was abandoned.[75] It may be significant, however, that in the same year the Belfast Reading Society (founded 1787) altered its name to the Belfast Society for Promoting Knowledge and proposed to provide not only a library but a 'complete philosophical apparatus'.[76] Although such a collection was begun, it was not until the establishment of the Academical Institution in 1814 that Belfast obtained a school of natural philosophy. By then Belfast had become the education centre for Ulster Presbyterianism, a bonus that might have gone to Cookstown as recently as 1795, if the government had heeded the request of the synod of Ulster.[77]

With a population of almost 20,000, Belfast was by 1800 setting the pace for other towns in the province. A portrait of contemporary Belfast life was produced in that

[72] P. Brooke, *Ulster Presbyterianism: the Historical Perspective, 1610–1970* (Belfast, 1994), pp. 90–5.

[73] Smout, *History of Scottish People*, pp. 474–6.

[74] Andrews, *Plantation Acres*, pp. 127, 174, 349–52.

[75] D. Kennedy, 'The Ulster academies and the teaching of science, 1785–1835', *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, 63 (1944), 28–34.

[76] J.J. Monaghan, 'A social and economic history of Belfast, 1790–1800' (PhD thesis, Queen's University, Belfast, 1936), pp. 428–30.

[77] T.W. Moody and J.C. Beckett, *Queen's Belfast, 1845–1949*, 2 vols (London, 1959), vol. I, p. xlii.

year at the theatre, entitled 'A Ramble through Belfast'. The programme indicates what visitors to Belfast thought significant and characteristic of the town:

I      Description of the Academy and the Church, Donegall Street – Arts, Sciences, etc.
II     The Poor House – Blessings arising from Charity, etc.
III    The Exchange on a business day – Traffic, etc.
IV     Rooms on a coterie night – Music, Taste, etc.
V      The Quay – Benefits arising from Shipping and Commerce.
VI     The Linen Hall and Manufactory – The staple wealth of Ireland and the comforts of industry.
VII    A Peep into the Playhouse – Actors, critics, etc.
VIII   A Tavern scene and the nightly adventures of a Buck.
IX     Conclusion – A eulogy on the Town, Trade, and Commerce of Belfast.[78]

This description reveals that although Belfast was not a metropolis it was certainly a town in its own right. It was setting provincial standards in health and social welfare. As well as the Poor House it had a dispensary (1792), a maternity hospital (1794) and a fever hospital (1797), and would soon have a school for the blind (1801). It was predominant in banking and insurance, and in the dissemination of local culture through printers, newspapers and societies; and it had become the first industrial town in the province with a wide variety of industries. In the following half century it would come to dominate the province and dictate its development.

While the character of Belfast resembled that of Glasgow, it strongly contrasted with that of Armagh, which had become the ecclesiastical capital of Ireland as well as a county and assize town. The transformation of Armagh was the achievement of one man, the ideal patron who arrived in 1765 in the person of the new archbishop, Richard Robinson. He became Baron Rokeby of Armagh in 1777 and succeeded to his brother's baronetcy in 1785, and took up his residence in the city as Primate of the Church of Ireland. Robinson directed and financed the construction of many fine buildings including his palace (1770), the public library (1771), the Royal School (1774), the County Infirmary (1774), the observatory (1791), the gaol (1780) and a military barracks (1773). One visitor, Arthur Young, recorded: 'He (the Primate) found it a nest of mud cabins, and he will leave it a well-built city of stone and slate'.[79] Archbishop Robinson's building programme survived his death in 1794. Armagh became the centre for polite society in south Ulster, and its needs for transport, legal, financial, administrative, cultural, residential and consumer services ensured that it grew rapidly, drawing in many immigrants.[80]

Someone who must have understood the culture of the eighteenth century left these pithy comments about the changes in Londonderry between the 1770s and the 1830s:

[78] W.S. Clark, *The Irish Stage in the County Towns, 1720–1800* (Oxford, 1965), p. 284.
[79] A.W. Hutton, ed., *Arthur Young's Tour in Ireland (1776–1779)*, 2 vols (London, 1892), vol. I, p. 119.
[80] W.H. Crawford, 'The evolution of the urban network' in A. Hughes, ed., *Armagh: History & Society* (Dublin, 2001), pp. 851–80.

That gravity of character is indeed the most striking feature of the inhabitants of Derry is evident to the most careless observer. It is manifested by the appearance of the city at night, when the streets, at a comparatively early hour, are nearly deserted, and the repose of the inhabitants rarely disturbed by the noise of the drunken brawler. It is exhibited still more remarkably on Sundays, when everything indicates strict order, decorum, and a scrupulous observance of the Sabbath. It is apparent also in the prevailing indifference to public amusements, to polite literature, and to the fine arts. The theatre has been converted into a coach-house; . . . the concerts have been discontinued; the coteries, presided over by a King and Queen of the night, have died away; and even the horse-races are probably less attractive than the meetings of the farming societies, and seem marked with all the symptoms of decay. These results are in part traceable to the absorbing influences of political as well as of religious enthusiasm, and in part to more local causes. The tastes for these amusements may be said to have owed their origin to the increase of a wealthy aristocracy, and to the circumstances connected with the events of 1782, which called into existence a new enthusiasm, also political, but one which extended its influence to all classes.[81]

The writer had seen the distinctive institutions of late eighteenth-century life, the products of an aristocracy with time and money to enjoy itself, replaced within half a century by those of the petty bourgeois, the merchants and tradesmen of the towns and the more substantial farmers in the countryside, with a strong emphasis on religion.

## Conclusion

In these developments the Ulster towns differed little from various characteristics described by Blumin in his discussion paper 'When villages became towns'. The circumstances of the creation and evolution of Ulster towns illustrate Blumin's argument that 'the upsurge [in town formation] is best explained as one effect of the rapid expansion of the capitalist, commercial–industrial economy, which required a number of new centres for the production of non-agricultural goods, and a very large number of widely dispersed new centres both for the distribution of these goods and the collection of the output of an increasingly market-orientated agricultural sector.'[82] Many landlords in the eighteenth century were quick to provide facilities to support the domestic linen industry and, later in the century, the export trade in cattle and pigs, while their urban policies were designed to attract businesses retailing English-manufactured goods. The experience of Ulster towns bears out another of Blumin's observations about the evolution of urban culture: 'The fact that most towns emerged within long-established urban systems does much more to explain both the relative ease and the relative lack of creativity with which villages developed and accommodated to town ways,

[81] Colby, *OS Memoir of Templemore*, p. 193.
[82] Stuart M. Blumin, 'When villages became towns' in D. Fraser and Anthony Sutcliffe, eds, *The Pursuit of Urban History* (London, 1983), p. 67.

as the new towns utilised widely understood models of physical design, institutional developments and public decorum'.[83]

And yet in Ulster certain peculiarities were evident. Some of them were rooted in the origins of the colony. The most significant occurred in the early years of the Plantation when the Crown abandoned its plan to create a network of corporate towns that would have dominated substantial districts across the province. This betrayal of a principle that it had considered fundamental to the success of the project consigned the task of developing new towns to the new landlords, composed of inexperienced 'undertakers' and government officials, the majority of whom lacked the resources even to improve their estates. Instead of providing leadership, the towns became appendages to the estates. Town meetings, which became such a vital institution in New England, did not emerge in Ulster. The landlords themselves were not so successful in imposing their rule on the townspeople. Because they had to compete to obtain British tenants by offering generous terms in their leases and then by nursing tenants through bad years and disasters, many of them granted tenements on three-life renewable leases to those tenants who promised to build a dwelling on them. Neither the town nor the estate could compel the tenant to maintain the property nor could they interfere in its management.

It is unlikely that many of these towns would have survived if the domestic linen industry had not become so successful by the mid-eighteenth century. Insistence by the Linen Board on properly run markets brought new life and income to the market towns. Competition between linen drapers improved quality. It filtered money right through the social system into the hands of the families of farmer–weavers and enabled them to lease small farms. When the gentry and merchants of the province failed to maintain a turnpike road system, the grand juries were able also to convince the tenants to pay county cess towards the construction and repair of roads which, in turn, provided employment for many more. These new roads and bridges opened up marginal lands for reclamation and developed new routes that linked communities, providing even more opportunities. And in the closing years of the century, when the domestic linen industry was coming under more pressure from industrialisation in the cotton industry, growing demands from Britain for Irish livestock helped farmers to cope with change. The success of the towns still depended to a considerable extent on the prosperity of the countryside. Thus, whereas in England towns of between 2,500 and 100,000 inhabitants contained three-tenths of the population in 1800, by that time only one in fifteen of the total population of Ulster lived in towns with more than 2,000 people.[84] Clearly, Ulster still lagged behind both England and Scotland in terms of urbanisation (and also behind the provinces of Leinster and Munster in Ireland), but it is evident that the process was beginning to get under way in earnest in the province, led by Belfast with its great commercial and industrial potential.

---

[83] *Ibid.*, p. 67.
[84] Revised figures as explained in Appendix, Table 1, of D. Dickson, C. Ó Grada and S. Daultrey, 'Hearth tax, household size and Irish population change, 1672–1821', *PRIA*, 82 (Dublin, 1982), C, number 6, 178.

LINDSAY PROUDFOOT

## Markets, Fairs and Towns in Ireland, *c.*1600–1853

Synoptic overviews of the economic performance of Irish towns during the early modern period, particularly in the 'long' eighteenth century, have been hindered by the relative paucity of adequate comparative data relating to provincial urban marketing and industry during the period. This paper attempts to circumvent this limitation by using the 1853 Parliamentary Report on *Fairs and Markets* to explore the regional and chronological variations in the pattern of urban and rural marketing provision in Ireland between 1600 and 1853. It concludes that the complex geographies of fair and market foundation demonstrated a pronounced space–time congruity with secular trends in agrarian production, regional patterns of proto-industrialisation and colonial transformations in settlement and economic space, as well as variations in the physical environment. Prominent within these was the historic province of Ulster, which emerges as a region of uniquely different patterns and processes of market provision. Finally, the uniformly high rates of fair and market failure are argued to cast doubt on the conventional emphasis placed on the role of landlord patrons as both necessary and sufficient agents of urban improvement.

W.H. CRAWFORD

## The Creation and Evolution of Small Towns in Ulster in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

The character of Ulster's urban network was determined by its colonial origins in the early seventeenth century. When the Crown abandoned its initial plan to create a network of corporate towns across the province, the task was left to immigrant landlords with small resources. Although the colony suffered in the seventeenth-century wars, further heavy immigration from Britain gave it fresh impetus. Landlords competed to attract tenants by letting tenements at cash rents on three-life renewable leases. By the early eighteenth century a domestic linen industry was transforming both the economy and society of the province. Government insistence on the sale of linens in public markets encouraged investment in the urban and communications networks. Then demand from Britain for Irish livestock boosted markets and fairs. The process of urbanisation in Ulster was getting under way in earnest, led by Belfast with its great commercial and industrial potential. Yet in 1800 only one in fifteen of the total population of Ulster lived in towns with more than two thousand people.

# Abbreviations

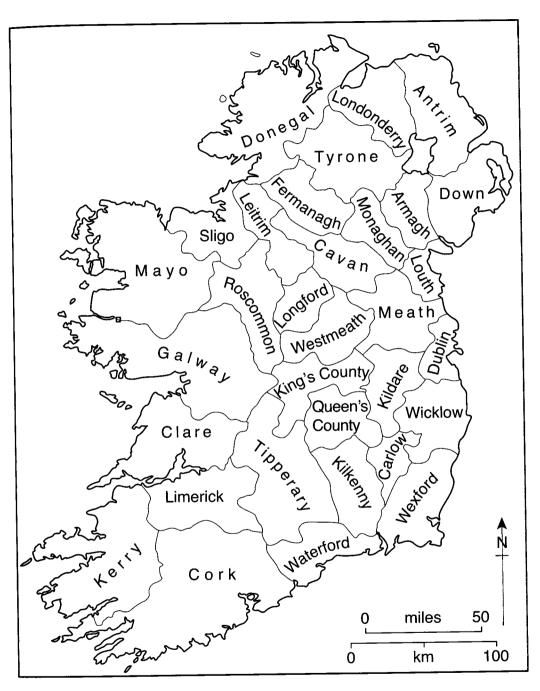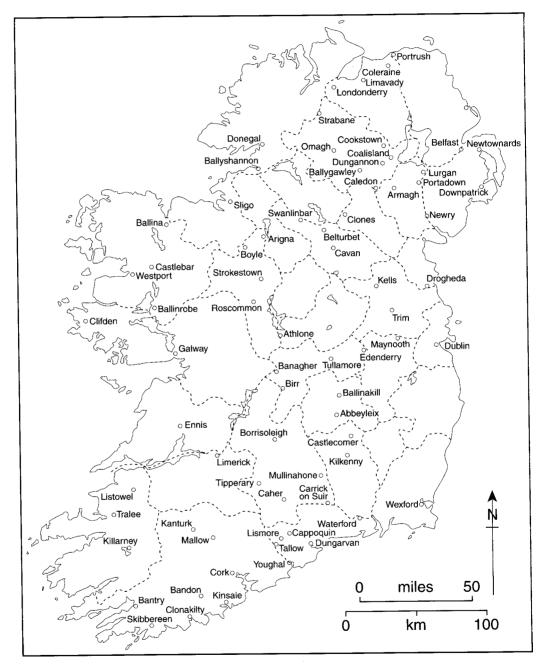| | |
|---|---|
| BL | British Library |
| *Cal. S. P. Ire* | *Calendar of State Papers, Ireland* |
| HC | House of Commons |
| *JCHAS* | *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* |
| *JRSAI* | *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* |
| KTCM | Records of the Corporation of Kells, 1685–1787: NLI MS 25446, 8 vols |
| *LPK* | C. McNeill, ed., *Liber primus Kilkenniensis* (Dublin, 1931) |
| NA | National Archives [Dublin] |
| *NHist.* | *Northern History* |
| NLI | National Library Ireland |
| *Parl. Gaz.* | *The Parliamentary Gazetteer of Ireland* |
| PP | Parliamentary Papers |
| *PRIA* | *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* |
| PRO | Public Record Office |
| PRONI | Public Record Office of Northern Ireland |
| RO | Record Office |
| TCD | Trinity College, Dublin |
| *UH* | *Urban History* |
| *UHY* | *Urban History Yearbook* |
| *VCH* | *Victoria County History* |

**Figure 0.1.** Ireland: county map.

*Maps*



**Figure 0.2.** Ireland: places mentioned.