



**TIPPERARY HISTORICAL JOURNAL
2000**

© County Tipperary Historical Society

**www.tipperarylibraries.ie/th
society@tipperarylibraries.ie**

ISSN 0791-0655

Marlfield's coloured embroidery industry and Lady Aberdeen

By Nellie Beary-Ó Cléirigh

Marlfield, a pretty laid-out landlord's village, two miles W.S.W. of Clonmel, is a very old village. Originally called "Abbey", it was important because it was on the old road from Clonmel to Cork. When he visited there at the end of the eighteenth century Arthur Young described it as a busy prosperous place owned by Stephen Moore, "celebrated in Ireland for his uncommon exertions in every branch of agriculture". Stephen Moore had built a huge flour mill in 1776 containing nine grinding stones.

By 1837 when Lewis's *Topographical Dictionary* was published the village had a distillery for whiskey "on a very extensive scale" and there were 1,123 inhabitants. The Bagwells then owned most of Marlfield village and had built an "Elegant mansion in a well-planted demesne", Marlfield House. Local lore provided the information that the Bagwells were Cromwellian planters. The 1901 Census shows that they were the owners of the ground rents of most of the property in Clonmel and of streets of substantial two-storey houses like Mary Street and Morton Street.



Marlfield House in 1900.

Some years earlier, in 1846, *Slater's Directory* described the Marlfield Distillery as "one of the largest in the world" and the village supported two schools, Abbey National school and Abbey Parochial School. At this time too Mary Anne Shannon leased from John Bagwell "House, offices, flour mills and land". Griffith's Valuation of 1850 showed that the property in the village owned by John Bagwell included both schools.

However, the prosperity of Marlfield did not last. When *Bassett's Guide and Directory* was published in 1889, the village was described as "some years ago a busy place, with a large distillery. Now it is chiefly remarkable for its beautiful scenery and antiquities." This was the period when Mrs. Bagwell set up the coloured embroidery industry in Marlfield and a clothing industry in Clonmel.

Mrs. Harriette Philippa Jocelyn Bagwell (*nee* Newton) was the daughter of Philip Jocelyn Newton, of Dunlecky, Co. Carlow and married Richard Bagwell on 9 January 1873. He was then owner of Marlfield House. The family were regarded as good employers and played a large part in local affairs. Richard was a magistrate and Deputy Lieutenant for the county, and Secretary of the Protestant Orphan Society.

In 1883 Mrs. Bagwell entered a quilt for the Art Needlework Section of the Cork Exhibition which was included in the display of "Lace, embroidery and needlework" collected by the Ladies Committee. The village of Marlfield may have had a tradition of needlework skills even then, as the children of the girls' national school won a certificate at the exhibition for plain needlework.

Some of the surplus money from the 1883 Cork Exhibition was used to fund a committee set up the following year to improve the standard of design in lace-making and embroidery in Ireland. Among the subscriptions received by the committee was £5 from Richard Bagwell. Mrs. Bagwell was a member of the committee, as was Lady Aberdeen, the wife of the Viceroy. Lady Aberdeen was later to become an important figure in the Marlfield industry. Of local interest are the names of some other members of the committee – the Duke of Devonshire, the Duchess of St. Alban's, and Miss Keane of Cappoquin, whose family ran a lace industry.

The experience of involvement in the Cork Exhibition and the new committee may have encouraged Mrs. Bagwell to think up ways of providing employment for women in Clonmel and Marlfield, because the following year a cottage industry was started in Clonmel. A knitting and sewing class of about 30 girls attended at the Literary Institute every Monday from 3.30 to 5.30 p.m. The work consisted of fancy knitting, sewing, crochet and lace-making. Mrs. Bagwell presided.



Cottage embroidery at Marlfield.

The Clonmel industry, which specialised in fine underlinen and babies' clothes, employed about 16 women in 1888. Its success may have prompted Mrs. Bagwell to try something different, because in 1886 she set up the Marlfield Coloured Embroidery Industry. By 1888 the Marlfield business was sufficiently well known to merit inclusion in Helen Blackburn's *Handy Book of reference for Irishwomen*.

The embroidery produced by the Marlfield industry was done with white flax thread on coloured cotton stuff. The designs for this work were original and graceful, and the effect excellent; the garments also washed well. The goods on offer were coverlets or quilts at £1.16s; teacloths 7s. 9d.; cushion covers with monogram 5s.6d.; children's frocks 11s. 6d to 14s. 6d.; aprons 5s. 6d.; nightgowns and brush cases 3s. 6d to 4s. 6d.

Mrs. Bagwell next had nine young women trained to do this work in the village of Marlfield, and had several others in training. They earned from 5s. to 9s. per week. As a beginning for this training, Mrs. Bagwell taught the younger workers to dress dolls. The dolls were 18 inches high with wax heads. The clothes were made so that they could be taken off and put on again, and all the articles of dress were complete. The girls did not earn much on the dolls, but they learned skill. When they could dress the dolls well they were "promoted" to the embroidery. Five girls between 10 and 15 were then at work on the dolls.

Tipperary South Riding County Museum has included in its collections samples of the dolls clothes. The items are mounted on a long piece of plain fabric, which was backed with brightly coloured cotton. The entire presentation was then rolled. It is probable that this set of clothes were intended for use as samples.

The 1901 Census provides the names of some of the embroidresses. Ellen Keating was 36 and the widowed daughter of Mary Hally, also a widow. Another daughter, Margaret, was 26 and single. Mary Louisa Keogh described herself as "fancy needle worker"; she was the daughter of Philip Keogh, a retired police sergeant. Mary Dower was 27 and the daughter of an agricultural labourer.

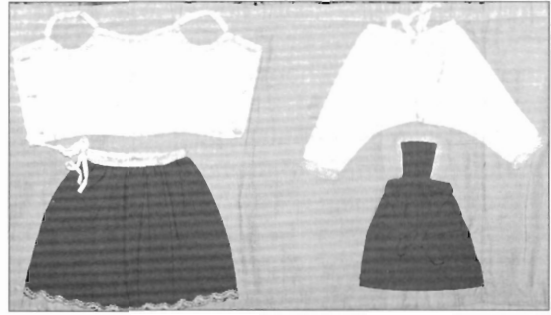
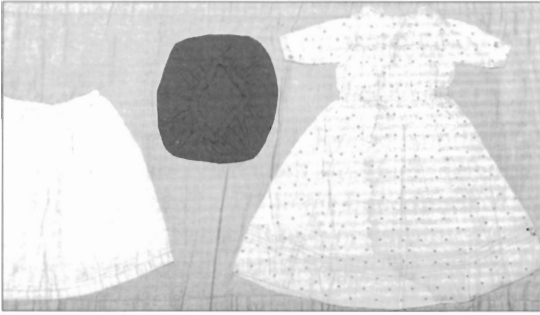
Mrs. Bagwell used her contacts, especially Lady Aberdeen, to promote sales. The latter was mainly responsible for setting up a depot for the sale of work from industries like Marlfield, which opened in Dawson Street in Dublin and later moved to Suffolk Street and eventually to Grafton Street.

When a lace dealer, Ben Lindsey, died, Lady Aberdeen set up a voluntary committee to take over his Grafton St. shop and operate it as the Irish Lace Depot. There was also an outlet in Motcomb St. in London. This was set up on a non-profit-making basis, with Lady Aberdeen as patron.

Probably one of the biggest outlets for the Marlfield work was at the Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893. An Irish village, which included a round tower and a copy of Blarney Castle, was built, backed by Lord Aberdeen. His wife organised the Irish contributions. She personally chose 40 girls to demonstrate and sell their goods and guaranteed their safety to their mothers. The catalogue of the exposition does not indicate whether anyone from Marlfield went to the Chicago Fair but two women merited having their photograph included in the catalogue.

According to the catalogue, Lady Aberdeen spent some time in Limerick selecting lace for the exhibition. Referring to Mrs. Bagwell, the catalogue stated: "This good lady had taught the peasant girls who reside on her husband's property a beautiful form of simple embroidery, samples of which can be seen in the Irish Village.

"The girls carry on the work at their own hearths, or at the cottage-door on the long summer nights, and when it is completed it is sold for them by Mrs. Bagwell, who overlooks every



Samples of embroidery for dolls' clothes from Marlfield. – Photographs copyright S. Tipperary Co. Museum.

detail of the industry, paying her workers weekly herself in her own room, and who makes it a condition that a certain portion of the money obtained is lodged in the savings bank. And thus it is that all these girls have a nice little nest-egg against the day of their marriage; or if they do not marry, the money is there to fall back on in their old age." Lady Aberdeen was an avid photographer and it is probable that the Marlfield photos reproduced in the Chicago exhibition catalogue were taken by her.

The Irish village at the Chicago Fair was one of the undertakings which made a profit; £50,000 went to the workers in Ireland, and some of this money was used to set up a depot in Chicago for the sale of more of the goods. Lady Aberdeen was a first-class opportunist. She got on loan fixtures and glass cases for the exhibition from Gordon Selfridge, who was then a director of Marshall Field in Chicago.

We must also give her credit for quick thinking. When she discovered that President Cleveland would not be visiting the Irish village at the opening of the Fair, she rushed six of the prettiest Irish girls to the railway station with presents of a blackthorn stick and a Limerick lace handkerchief for the departing President.

The Marlfield industry had a display at the Home Industries Section of the Irish International Exhibition in Dublin in 1907, where Lady Aberdeen was again involved. There were then eight workers and "a ready market and more labour available". However, like so many similar undertakings the Marlfield industry does not appear to have survived World War I.

As well as the embroidery industry Mrs. Bagwell held sewing classes for the children of the national school on Saturdays. Samplers seem to have been the favourites of the children. Because they were not made for sale and were kept by the children or their families, several have survived. The first reproduced here was made by my aunt, Nan Beary of Toberaheena House, which has kindly been lent for photographing by her daughter,



Sampler done at Marlfield in 1911.

my cousin, Mrs. Paula Power, Maynestown, Carrick-on-Suir. The second, made by Helena Phelan, is the property of Tipperary South Riding County Museum and is reproduced with their permission. Though the samplers are seven years apart in date, the design is almost the same.

The Bagwells continued their interest in Marlfield National School. When I attended there in the 1930s a member of the family was manager, although at that time the local parish priest was usually the manager. Two Miss Bagwells, large Miss Margaret and small Miss Emily, daughters of Harriette, came to inspect our needlework books and our drawings of flowers.

They also provided prizes for the flower-beds which we cultivated in the large play-ground and they gave a party for the school children at Christmas. At the party we provided entertainment. I was one of several girls who sang a washer-woman's song, with appropriate actions. Later we did a repeat performance for the school inspector. I still remember his remark to Miss Scally, that a girl in the back row was not singing; Miss Scally replied that she was not meant to!

I can only suppose that there was an acute shortage of talent or that I fitted into the blue dress and apron, but I distinctly remember being warned not to sing. The standard of sewing and knitting taught by Miss Scally and Miss Keating must have been high. I can still do a good darn and if put to the test could probably turn the heel of a sock.

Women like Mrs. Bagwell are largely forgotten today. Yet many such landlord families, and the wives and unmarried daughters of Church of Ireland clergymen and, of course, the nuns of various religious orders, provided a huge service for Ireland's poor in the last century, and are given little credit. Also, small industries like that at Marlfield must have brought relative prosperity to many homes.



View of Irish pavilion, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893.