



**TIPPERARY HISTORICAL JOURNAL  
2000**

**© County Tipperary Historical Society**

**[www.tipperaryllibraries.ie/th](http://www.tipperaryllibraries.ie/th)  
[society@tipperaryllibraries.ie](mailto:society@tipperaryllibraries.ie)**

**ISSN 0791-0655**

# *Presbyterianism in the Fethard area (1690-1919): Part I*

---

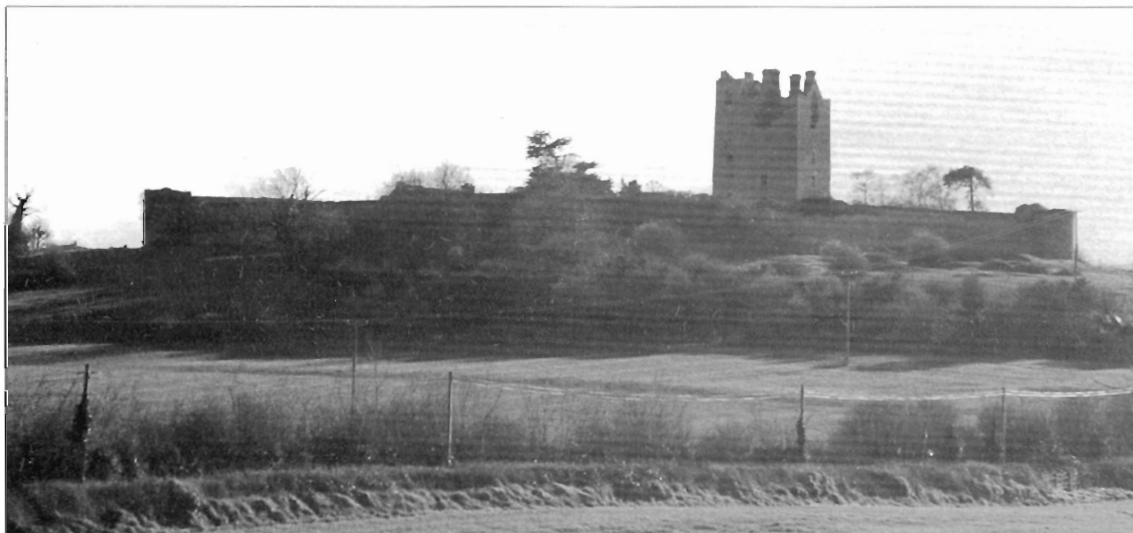
By David Butler

## Background

In most parts of Ireland outside of the province of Ulster, the words “Protestant” and “Protestant Church” have been associated with the Church of Ireland, which has had by far the largest Protestant church membership in Ireland in the past, and this remains so today. There are, however, other Protestant groupings, of which Presbyterianism is the principal denomination, and these dissenters from the established church existed to a much greater extent in the latter half of the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries.

Indeed, for the decade of the Cromwellian Protectorate (1650-60), Presbyterianism and its associated Puritan denominations (Congregationalists (Independents) and Baptists) formed both the government and the state religion of Britain and Ireland. After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 the Church of Ireland was restored as the established state church. There followed a two-year period of uncertainty, during which many Cromwellian planter families conformed to the Church of Ireland. However, by the Act of Uniformity (1662) many had also resolved not to do so, despite the penalties involved.

County Tipperary contained some particularly hardy, uncompromising Cromwellian families, and these were instrumental in setting up dissenting congregations, particularly in the southern half of the county. From about 1661 there were Independents (Congregationalists) meeting at Clonmel and Tipperary (sharing a minister), Baptists at Clonmel and Cloghkeating



*Knockkelly Castle.*

(near Cloughjordan), a Presbyterian meeting at Tipperary, and also recently formed Friends (Quaker) meetings at Cashel, Cahir and Clonmel.

In 1673 some disaffected Baptists of Clonmel and district, led by Col. Sankey (Governor of Cromwillian Clonmel), joined with the Independent congregation of that town in calling for the services of a resident Presbyterian minister. The underlying reason for this was the recent loss of a resident Baptist minister at Clonmel, and the dissatisfaction of both the Baptists and Independents with the system of preaching supplies from Cork and Tipperary respectively. The Presbyterians, then strong numerically and financially in Ulster and Dublin, were prepared to settle ministers in county towns and other places where there were sufficient subscribers towards a ministerial stipend. This was the case at Clonmel, where Mr. William Cocks was settled late in 1673.

Clonmel was the centre of Protestantism in county Tipperary and district until well into the nineteenth century. During the 1650s many Cromwellians settled there prior to moving to county estates confiscated from the native Irish. Captain Mathew Jacob of Wiltshire was one of these. He settled at Clonmel in 1655 and bought a house there.<sup>1</sup> In the immediate post-Restoration period many Cromwellian families left Clonmel for the relative obscurity of their county estates, much enlarged by the purchase of quality acreage on the cheap from colleagues desperate to return to England or emigrate to New England. By the time of the Hearth Money Rolls of 1665-6-7, these gentry families were to be found in particular in the area between Cashel and Killenaule, centering on Fethard and district.

The six families identifiable as Presbyterian all had houses with between two and five hearths by this time, indicating considerable wealth. This was all the more remarkable as they dissented from the established church, and were discriminated against like Roman Catholics until the passing of the Toleration Act in 1719. The principal concession of this Act was that which allowed the building of purpose-built meeting houses for worship (a rare achievement for any congregation before this date), and the continuation of the recently created annual Royal Grant (*Regium Donum*) to dissenting congregations then in existence, for the maintenance of church and minister.

### Role of Jacob family

Captain Mathew Jacob, the founder of the Presbyterian cause in the Fethard district, was resident in the four-hearth Castle of Knockkelly, in the parish of Peppardstown, from about 1661. This fortress still survives in good repair on its impressive hilltop site, complete with outer bawn wall, as a reminder of the unsettled period before settler mansions could be built in Ireland. Other Presbyterian households in Fethard district included Ambrose Minchin of Coolquill and Lieut. Humphrey Minchin of Shangarry (both in Crohane parish), Oliver Latham of Meldrum (Cashel parish), Edward Markham of Ballytoher (Ballinure parish) and John Pyke of Woodinstown (Knockgraffon parish).<sup>2</sup>

Most intermarried with the Jacobs and each other, and were all closely related by the turn of the eighteenth century. The Jacobs make an interesting case-study. Captain Jacob died intestate at Knockkelly in 1683, leaving two daughters and one son. His daughter Mary died unmarried, while the other (unnamed) married Captain Richard Sankey, M.P. for Fethard and a Colonel in the army of William III. This couple had two sons named Mathew and Jacob, who began the family dynasty at Coolmore.

The only son of Captain Jacob, born *circa* 1660, became known as Mathew Jacob Esq. of St.



Johnstown, following his acquisition of that townland and castle at the estate sales of the dukes of Ormonde and York in 1688. He was married to Elizabeth Minchin of Shangarry, Crohane, daughter of fellow Presbyterian, Lieut. Humphrey Minchin. They had three sons and three daughters. The daughters all maintained contact with local Presbyterian families, with the eldest, Abigail, marrying her first cousin, Jacob Sankey. The second daughter, Elizabeth, wed John Latham of Meldrum and the youngest, Rebecca, married Edward Millett of Shangarry.

The three sons were all settled on local estates, with the eldest, Samuel, at Ballingarry, the second Mathew III at Mobarnane (bought by his father in 1710) and the youngest, John at Coolmore.<sup>3</sup> The family were the backbone not only of local Presbyterianism, but also of local politics and society. Mathew Jacob II was elected M.P. for Fethard in 1699, and was unsuccessfully petitioned against by elements within the established church. He was returned in 1703 under similar circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

The earliest meetings for Presbyterian worship in the Fethard district were most likely held in Knockkelly Castle from the early 1660s, and regularly attended by the above families, and others, owing to distance, who would have also conducted their own sabbath house worship. From about 1690, on the settlement of the Jacob family at St. Johnstown, these meetings transferred to the castle there. Virtually all New English families in county Tipperary continued to live in fortified castle dwellings until about the third decade of the eighteenth century. This was due to a combination of their insecurity as a recently arrived alien aristocracy and gentry, the unsettled, rebellious nature of the county, and their small number within it. Although the first truly unfortified mansion of South Tipperary was built at Thomastown, Golden by the Mathew family as early as the 1670s, it was very much the exception, and did not commence a trend.

It was only in the years immediately following the building of the Cashel Palace in 1730-32 that widespread movement from fortified castle to newly constructed houses commenced. Smaller gentry houses were being built by about 1720, and just such a house may have been built at St. Johnstown as early as 1719. A tiny marking with this date is carved upon a window-sill of the upper storey; but on closer inspection this would appear to be of later insertion. This house, built in the courtyard of St. Johnstown Castle, is a very substantial farmhouse of the 1720-40 period, still retaining the massive original front door.

### From Mission Station to Congregation

As with virtually all southern Presbyterian congregations, early details are sketchy. One of the earliest sources of information – the diary of the Rev. John Cooke – was begun in 1698, and continued until his death in 1733. Although he was minister of Tipperary town from 1700 until 1705, his writings of even that congregation are at best vague, and while mention of several other congregations is made, notably that of Clonmel, no notice whatsoever is taken of Fethard district or any Presbyterian individuals living within it.

It would seem, however, that the families meeting at Knockkelly Castle, and subsequently at St. Johnstown, were a mission station under the Clonmel congregation. They conducted house-meetings for worship, and were occasionally supplied with preaching by the minister of Clonmel, and other passing ministers. Members travelled to Clonmel for quarterly communion services until the 1720s, by which time Fethard district contained approximately thirty Presbyterian individuals, based on six or seven families. They were quite wealthy for such a small congregation, and in 1724 purchased a silver communion chalice of Dublin silver, and had it inscribed “St. Johnstown”, the location of their meeting-place.



From this time they were virtually independent of Clonmel, and it is not surprising that a call was issued soon after to the Presbyterian Church Body for the regular services of a minister. In 1728 Rev. Samuel Hemphill was ordained to the joint charge of Ballybrittas and Fethard and, despite the considerable distance between the two communities, supplied both with weekly services. It is likely that each had a Sunday service or a mid-week Bible study on alternate weeks. This arrangement was not uncommon in this period, and was used where two or more small congregations were unable to support a minister on their own, but willing to share his services and expenses between them. This circuit system was later made popular by the Methodists from the mid-eighteenth century.

Rev. Hemphill continued to supply both congregations until 1739, when he resigned the ailing Ballybrittas congregation to become minister at Fethard, where he continued until his death in 1761.<sup>5</sup> He and his family settled at Springhill, Killenaule, where they built Springhill House, and farmed the estate there until the mid-twentieth century, though they were attached to the Church of Ireland by the early nineteenth century. He was also ancestor of the famous Dr. Hemphill, pioneer photographer of Clonmel.

According to G. H. Bassett, a meeting house for Presbyterians in connection with the Synod of Munster was built in the town of Fethard in 1739.<sup>6</sup> There is every reason to take this finding as correct. Bassett's researchers were meticulous in all aspects of their work, and would also have had the advantage of conversation with elderly oral historians living in the area, and possibly also the opportunity to view ancient documents. In addition, 1739 was the year a minister was first settled permanently at Fethard. A date-stone inscribed "Jacob 1739" survives at St. Johnstown, where it was obviously brought from the meeting-house for safekeeping. Amazingly, this meetinghouse still survives at Burke (formerly Moor) Street, with original roof and ceiling virtually intact.

The Jacob Estate owned and built all of Moor Street, and funded the building costs of the meeting house solely. It is built solidly of cut limestone, free of any rendering, and has brick trim around the roof and windows. A large chunk of the outer layer of stone is missing on the gable nearest the street, and it is obviously from here that the datestone was removed. Fethard meeting house is the second oldest purpose-built Presbyterian Church in Ireland outside of the province of Ulster.

Up to the passing of the Toleration Act of 1719, private houses were often used discreetly in towns and cities, while in rural areas meetings were generally conducted openly in locations at least four miles from the nearest town, as was the case at St. Johnstown. Of those built before 1750, few have survived intact even within Ulster, and hardly any for their original purpose. The only southern Irish dissenting meeting house older than Fethard is the Unitarian Presbyterian Church, Princes Street, Cork, built in 1717, and still in use for its original intended purpose.

## Congregations' Member Families

Information on congregations in the south of Ireland in this period is notoriously difficult to obtain. Even the ministerial succession can have gaps, or information lapses. Hemphill's successor was a Mr. Bryson, about whom nothing is known. He had a short ministry in Fethard, and he had removed by early 1766, when Mr. James Rodgers of Strabane was ordained in Fethard meeting house. In that year a nationwide census of religious affiliation was conducted, and the upper two-thirds of South Tipperary retain some of the most comprehensive returns of the entire country.



In 1766 the Fethard-Mogorban area had a total of ninety-one Protestant families, of which, on surname analysis, approximately nine were Presbyterian, two were Quaker and the remainder Church of Ireland. Using a multiplier of 5.5, as recommended by Prof. Dickson, this translates to some five hundred individuals. Fethard had forty-seven families, and the town was then thirteen per cent Protestant, the surrounding district twenty-one per cent and Mogorban parish twenty-seven per cent Protestant.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the surviving detail for Fethard district, the rectors of Killenaule and Kilcooley failed to make a return, with the result that the religious composition of the civil parish of St. Johnstown is not known. However, it is likely that it was the only parish in the district containing Presbyterians which was not returned, and also that Samuel Jacob Esq. of St. Johnstown was probably the only Presbyterian householder in that parish. Thus it is possible to name and enumerate, with considerable accuracy, those families attached to Presbyterianism in the Fethard catchment area in 1766. In addition to the Jacobs of St. Johnstown and Mobarnane, there were the Sankeys of Fethard (2) and Coolmore, the Hendersons of Peppardstown and Mobarnane, the Minchins of Shangarry, Crohane and the Lathams of Knockbrack, Meldrum and Ballysheehan. These eleven households, when combined with that of the minister and perhaps household servants, may have numbered sixty individuals or more.

Rev. Rodgers of Fethard congregation died there in 1774, and there appears to have been a two-year vacancy, during which time the congregation received a weekly preaching supply from Clonmel. Mr. James Allen, a licentiate (trainee minister), came to Fethard from Derry in 1776, and was ordained there in 1778. He married a member of the Henderson family of Peppardstown House, and ministered at Fethard until his death in April 1824.

While several congregational visitations were likely held during his and previous ministries, the earliest to survive occurred towards the end of his ministry, on June 22, 1815. It was held at a low point for the Fethard congregation, recording only twenty-six members, of whom seventeen were communicants. Several of the old families – Latham, Jacob and Sankey – had either died out, converted to the Church of Ireland (through inter-marriage or otherwise), or had left the area. This last was the case with the Jacob family, the last members of which resided in Dublin by about 1800.

They had, however, left the congregation in a sound condition financially. In 1815 the church received £24 annual rent charge on the Jacob estate, plus a £28 annuity during Rev. Allen's lifetime, £58 *Regium Donum* and £104 4s 9d in subscriptions. When combined, this created a very considerable income of £120 4s 9d, which was huge wealth for a southern congregation at this time.<sup>8</sup> Congregational attendances began to increase from the 1820s, with the arrival of some new families in the area, and the succession of a new young minister, Robert Ferris, in July 1825.

While overall membership numbers are not given in annual Presbyterian Returns, Fethard had twenty-seven



*The communion chalice of Dublin silver, dating from 1724, used by the Presbyterian congregation which met at Knockkelly Castle.*

communicants in 1827, an increase of ten in as many years, and a further eight persons were being catechized. In 1830 it had thirty communicants, and the overall congregation was noted as “rapidly increasing”. Interestingly, a petition was sent from Fethard Congregation to Parliament, “praying that the Presbyterians might be returned from being compelled to serve as Churchwardens of the Established Church”.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, some of the wealthier members were still being compelled to serve at Fethard, Mogorban and Killenaule Parish Churches.

The first reliable congregational statistics of all congregations and churches in Ireland were compiled during 1831 and 1834, as the result of a Government Commission specially convened for that purpose. Of the two sets, those compiled in 1834 are by far the more accurate, those of 1831 having suffered some serious omissions, as was the case at Fethard. Presbyterians were returned in five civil parishes near Fethard, and all displayed numerical consistency over the three-year period save Fethard, which doubled from fourteen to twenty-eight members in that period.

There would seem to have been some sort of omission, for the Commission of 1834 requested that a census be personally conducted by the Presbyterian Minister under oath. It is interesting as a geographer, to be able to link numbers of church members with civil parish locations. In 1834, twenty-eight members, or fifty per cent of the congregation, resided in Fethard and suburbs; ten at Peppardstown; ten at St. Johnstown; six at Tullamaine and one at Crohane, a total of fifty-five individuals.

Information is also given on Presbyterian Church activities in the area in this period. There were two Sunday services and one on Thursday evenings. Attendance could be as high as fifty in summer, as low as twenty-five in winter and averaged thirty-five overall, which average had been increasing for the previous five years.<sup>10</sup> By this time the minister was resident in a rented house on 10 acres at Spitalfield adjacent to the town, there being no manse. Griffith’s Valuation of 1850 valued this house at £8, when those of £14 valuation or greater were considered “Big Houses”. In 1836 mission stations were opened under the Fethard minister at Dunderum, Littleton and Thurles, and weekday services were held in schoolhouses in those areas.

On November 1, 1848 Fethard Congregation was received into the Scots Presbytery of Munster from the Non-Subscribing (Unitarian) Synod of Munster to which it had been previously attached. A detailed visitation was held on that date as follows:

**Fethard:** Church held on a lease from Jacob Estate.

**Minister:** Rev. Robert Ferris.

**Elders:** Charles Wilson and Robert Harvey, both lately dead.

**Congregational Reps:** Messrs. Samuel Henderson, John Maunsell, John Daniel.

**Congregation:** 14 families – a total of 53 individuals; 34 communicants; no weekday service.

**Attendance:** (a.m.) = 30-40; (p.m.) = 12-20; no children for a Sunday School

**Endowments:** £22 per annum charged on Mr. Leatham, Meldrum Estates; £4 12s 9d per annum paid by representative of Miss Jacob.

**Minister’s stipend** is £10 p.a.; 7-8 families contribute.

(A letter was sent by the minister, on behalf of the congregation, stating that no member took part in the 1848 disturbances.<sup>10</sup>)

The concise nature of this report allows close comparison with those of 1815 and 1834 regarding the state of the congregation. In comparison with 1815, membership and communicants had doubled, but subscriptions remained static. The population of 1834 had been virtually maintained, even after two years of famine and emigration. Attendance also remained constant, and the church was in many ways like an elite offshoot of the local Church of Ireland, there being no poor in the congregation.

Indeed, in 1851, the congregation was recommended to use the Psalms of David instead of the hymns currently in use. It would seem the church authorities were concerned that the congregation was becoming insufficiently Presbyterian. The resilience of the congregation was no doubt due to the sizeable farms and merchant interests of its members.

They were not oblivious to the famine affecting the peasantry; both Rev. Ferris and Mrs. Elizabeth Wilson, a mill owner at The Valley near Fethard, are on record as having provided indispensable aid during the Famine years. However, following the death of Rev. Ferris in the autumn of 1850, Fethard congregation entered a decade of instability, during which there were three ministerial successions. The first, Rev. Isaiah Breakley, was ordained at Fethard in March 1851, and in an act almost traditional in Presbyterian congregations in this period, married Margaret Ferris, daughter of the late pastor in October 1852. This young minister died of smallpox early in 1854, and was succeeded by Rev. William Frederick White in May of that year.

### Renaissance – then Decline

About this time the Jacob estate was brought through the Encumbered Estates Court for bankruptcy. The private houses at Moor Street fronting the meeting house were auctioned, and those nearest the entrance were purchased by a person unsympathetic to the Presbyterian cause. This person disputed the right-of-way to the meeting house behind his house, and these difficulties may have led to the early departure of Rev. White after just three years for a more populous, less problematic northern charge.

His successor, Rev. William Johnston, endured some sixteen years, and stemmed the downward spiral in the fortunes of Fethard congregation. Within a few months of his installation, Johnston sent a letter to Presbytery complaining of obstacles being placed in the way of entrance to the church by hostile parties, and undertook to solve the problem, so that the congregation could worship in peace. Offers were made to purchase the offenders' property, but no reply was received. By about 1862, after four years of negotiation, it was decided to sell the meeting house of 1739, and build a new one on a more accessible site.

According to a Presbytery Visitation of this time, the meeting house had 150 sittings. There were twenty families in connection, of which seventeen contributed financially, and this can be converted to fifty-eight individuals, as returned in the Census of 1861. It is remarkable that even at this stage no overall membership loss had occurred, and that any losses through death or emigration were more than offset by baptisms, or the arrival of new families in the area. According to the Census, forty-two members resided in the Fethard/Cashel area, with a further sixteen around Kilcooley.

Fewer members now lived in the vicinity of Fethard than had previously been the case, and these findings were noted by Presbytery in their Visitation. "Average Attendance in Summer is 25 – the same attended the last communion of the 36 on the Roll. There were four baptisms in the past year, and only church members children are baptized. Members do not attend regularly, as many live at great distances. Some have family worship, and there is a congregational library of some 33 volumes".<sup>12</sup>

All was clearly not well, three families having lapsed from financial contribution. Losses to the established church through conversion and inter-marriage, or through death or emigration, were completely masked by the arrival of several new families at Kilcooley, predominantly Scots, in the employ of estates. From the 1860s in particular, it was almost fashionable for estates to have Scottish stewards, foresters, sawyers, gillies, herdsman and shepherds in their employ.





Their arrival into Kilcooley district accounted for a shift in Presbyterian population to that area, but owing to the distance of ten miles few could attend at Fethard but a few times per year. These families often remained but a few years, and could often be missed between census returns held each decade. Their number boosted the overall Presbyterian population of Fethard district to eighty persons by 1867, and they were ministered to in their homes, and at occasional services held in Bawnlea Methodist Chapel, Palatine Street, Kilcooley, from this period until the 1930s.

Regarding the building of the new church at Main Street, Fethard, exact details have not survived about costs, builders or architects, as they were the concern of the local congregation, and no such details were needed by the Church Body in Belfast. However, the fine site was obtained by 1863, and the church completed by 1865 at a cost of some £800, the whole venture displaying the measure of civic and financial prestige the congregation still maintained.

The first reports on the congregation subsequent to completion of the new building are those of 1868-69. In 1868 there were eighteen families in connection, and there were forty-five communicants. The new church contained one hundred sittings, a reduction of one-third on the old building. The Sunday School had one teacher and an average attendance of nine scholars, indicating an improved youth base, considering there were no children for such a venture in 1848. In addition to this the Visitation of 1869 indicates that the two Sunday services were still being maintained, at 11.30 a.m. and 5.00 p.m., but that the week-night service had been given up.

Remarkably, attendance had recovered to 1830s levels – about twenty in winter, fifty in summer or thirty-five on average through the year. Also, there had been two baptisms that year, and the report concluded by highly approving of the condition of Fethard congregation, considering its isolated location and highly scattered nature.<sup>13</sup> The Census of 1871, however, indicated a significant fall to fifty individuals, from the eighty recorded just four years previously, indicating the constant arrival and removal of families, domestic servants and garrisons.

Only half of these persons resided within reasonable distance of the church, with the remainder living up to ten miles away. Eighteen “families” were still being returned for the congregation in 1871 and 1872, but a report of March 1873, commissioned at the commencement of the vacancy caused by the removal of Rev. Johnston, returned thirteen families and six individuals (family remnants), which was often returned as nineteen families. From this, it seems probable that Fethard congregation had as few as thirty-five active members, and that a significant part of the widely scattered membership were Presbyterian in name only.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. A. H. Jacob and J. N. Glascott, 1875: *An Historical and Geneological Narrative of the Families of Jacob* (printed for private publication), p. 108-09
2. T. Laffan, 1911: *Tipperary's Families, being the Hearth Money Rolls for the years 1665-6-7* (Dublin), pp. 103-110, 113.
3. Jacob, *ibid.*, pp. 110-12.
4. Rev. W. G. Skehan, 1969: “Extracts from the Minutes of the Corporation of Fethard, Co. Tipperary”, in *The Irish Genealogist*, vol. 4, no. 2 (Oct. 1969), p. 85.
5. Presbyterian Historical Society, 1982: *A History of Congregations of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (P.H.S., Belfast), p. 480-82. Rev. Hemphill is buried in Killenaule Old Churchyard.
6. G. H. Bassett, 1991: *County Tipperary One Hundred Years Ago – A Guide and Directory, 1889* (The Friar's Bush Press, Belfast), p. 127.



7. Religious Census of 1766: Fethard-Mogorban Union of Parishes (copy in Co. Library, Thurles).
8. Extracts taken from the Minutes of the Transactions of the Southern Association of Protestant Dissenting Ministers, comprising the United Presbyteries of Dublin and Munster, commenced in the Year of Our Lord, 1809 (transcribed c. 1929 from originals now lost), vol. 1, (1809-1828) – Visitation of Fethard, June 22, 1815.
9. Ibid., vol. 2 (1829-1838) – Visitation of Fethard, July 7, 1830.
10. First Report of the Commissioners of Public Instruction of Ireland , 1834: Presented to both Houses of Parliament by order of His Majesty (London, 1835), p. 48-51.
11. Minute Book of the Presbytery of Munster, vol. 1, Fethard Visitation, Nov. 1, 1848.
12. Ibid., vol. 2 (1854-1907), Fethard Visitation, Nov. 6, 1860.
13. Ibid., Fethard Report of Congregation, March 31, 1868; Visitation of April 7, 1869.

*(The foregoing article is based on a talk given to the Fethard Historical Society on 23 April, 1999, at the Abynill Theatre, Fethard. Part II will appear in **Tipperary Historical Journal**, 2001.)*

