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Lighting the streets of Fethard, 1870-1914

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As the nineteenth century opened, most borough corporations were no longer effective in providing clean water and sewers or in the lighting and paving of streets. Fethard was an example of a borough that had declined noticeably long before it was abolished in 1840. To cope with such inadequacies an act¹ was passed in July 1828 which empowered any borough not having any of the basic services listed above to elect commissioners to implement them.

The members for Fethard were first elected in 1843, but were hampered by a lack of income. Ratepayers then as now would have strongly opposed any increase in rates, even for essential services. Also the act of 1828 was a limiting one; for example, the commissioners could arrange to have wells dug and pumps erected, but had no power to supply piped water.

Following their election Fethard's commissioners served for a three-year period and were expected to meet on the first Monday of each month. The minutes, which do not commence until 1877, have been used as the foundation for this article.² Greater powers were conferred on town commissioners by an act of 1854;³ but Fethard did not adopt it. The act of 1828 remained in force until the great reforming Local Government Act⁴ became law on 12 August 1898.

One of the functions of the newly-elected Fethard Town Commissioners was to oversee the adequate lighting of the streets. For the second half of the nineteenth century they were lit by oil lamps, which would have been little better than moonlight, but (for example) in 1876 the town had an expenditure of £131 out of an income of £157. 3s. 3d. received from house and land rents, dog tax and tolls collected at fairs and markets. So there would have been little money for improving the town's essential services.⁵

Certainly, the quality of lighting that we would expect today was not then available. At their meeting of 13 September 1881 the Commissioners requested that the town be lit on 16 nights a month between October and the end of April. The same terms applied in 1886, and a minute of 13 September 1897 records that the streets were lit on 140 nights between 1 October 1896 and 1 May 1897, but there was a total of 212 nights in this span. On 23 September 1889 the Commissioners ordered that lamps near places of worship be lighted every night during the winter. There were four such places in the town: two Catholic, one Church of Ireland and one Presbyterian.

In 1888 we read⁶ that the cost of maintaining 27 lamps in the town was £12.⁷ For the winter of 1883/84 a detailed account has survived⁸ which shows the total cost of lighting the streets with 27 oil-lamps; £12. 4s. 5½d. were paid to the representatives of M. J. McCarthy on 7 October 1884 for lighting materials and services supplied between 15 September 1883 and 31 March 1884.

From 15 September to the end of that month the lamps were lit on six nights and used 14.5 gallons of oil. In October they were lit on 19 nights and used 40.5 gallons; November, 18 nights and 40 gallons; December 23 nights and 50 gallons; January 1884, 21 nights and 46 gallons; February, 23 nights and 53 gallons; and finally for March 17 nights and 40 gallons. For all of the winter the lamps were lit on 127 nights and 284 gallons of oil at 7.5d the gallon were used, a total charge of £8. 11s. 7d.

That same winter 3 dozen yards of wick at 1s. 9d. the dozen were burned. Thirty-five large glasses at 6s. 6d. the dozen and 22 small glasses at 2s. the dozen were purchased. The wicks and the glasses cost £1. 7s. 10½d.



Fethard, showing today's public lighting system. (Photo: copyright Frank Burgess).

While Bassett noted that Fethard was lit by 27 lamps, this does not seem to have been a constant figure. Broken lamps appear not to have been promptly replaced. In 1893 the town was lit by 25 lamps; in the next year there were 26. Two had been purchased on 4 October 1897 at a cost of £2.10s. each. There were 28 lamps in 1898 and 29 the following year.

Like the number of lamps in use, the charges seem also to have varied. The supplying of oil, wicks and glasses for lamps were set out to tender, so we have a record of costs for each year. Between September 1878 and May 1879 the contractor supplied oil at a cost of 11d. for each imperial gallon (4.54 litres). Lamp wick cost 1s. 5d. a dozen yards, and the glasses for the lamps were 7s. the dozen for the larger size and 2s. 2d. the dozen for the smaller.

However, a minute of 3 May 1880 notes that oil cost 7.5d. the gallon, and that between 1 October 1879 and 1 May 1880 the town used 292 gallons at a cost of £9. 2s. 6d. In 1881 the outlay was 325 gallons, costing £16. 8s. 7½d. This seems to be more than the 10d. a gallon agreed in a minute of 13 September 1880; the overall cost may have included repairs.

Who lit and quenched Fethard's lamps? On 1 December 1890 the Town Sergeant was ordered to perform the task, but a year later a minute requested his removal. At a meeting of 23 September 1892 it was proposed that William Napier Junior be employed to fill the lamps with oil, attending to the wicks and to clean the glasses, and lighting and quenching the lamps. He would be paid £1. 14s. for every 30 days on which he worked. Napier was supplied with an oil-coat during inclement weather. Elsewhere in the county this task appears to have been performed by the urban watchmen.

Throughout the 1890s the Commissioners continued to seek tenders for the supply of oil. In 1894 William Morrissey's tender to light and repair 26 lamps between 1 October and 1 May on 20 nights a month for £22. 10s. was accepted. In 1898 the lighting, cleaning and repairing of 28 lamps passed to John Cormack for £22. In 1899 for supplying oil, lighting, and keeping in repair 29 public lamps for 20 nights a month for 140 nights between 11 September 1899 and 13 April 1900, the cost being £24.

As early as 2 December 1878 some Commissioners were considering electricity for street lighting. But 24 years were to pass before Fethard enjoyed such benefits. The question of providing electric lighting for Fethard did not again arise until a special meeting on 21 August 1901, and during the winter months of 1901/02 Fethard discovered the delights of having the streets lit by electricity. The parish priest, Archdeacon Jones, also had his church lit by electricity at this time.

Something seems to have gone amiss between Mr. Webb the supplier and the Town Commissioners in the summer of 1902. On 5 October 1902 the latter decided that the streets should again be lit by oil lamps during the coming winter. The oil lamps that had been taken down at the end of the previous winter now had to be re-erected. It was proposed that the cost of erecting the oil lamps and of maintaining them should be deducted from money due to Mr. Webb. However, at their meeting of 2 February 1903 the Commissioners asked him to have the lights "erected before next meeting" and the electricity working.

On 7 September 1903 the Commissioners and Mr. Webb signed a further agreement, and the latter undertook to supply the town with electric light at a cost of £30 a year. Knowles, writing in 1903, states:

it may astonish some of our readers to learn that Fethard can boast of being one of the few towns of its kind that has a very good installation of the Electric Light.

However, problems continued to bedevil the lighting of Fethard's streets. Webb's services were apparently not satisfactory. The Town Clerk was ordered on 5 October 1903 to "write to Mr. Webb to light the Town with oil lamps if he cannot procure Electric light within one week from this date." At their meeting of 2 May 1904 the Commissioners agreed to pay Webb £24 for lighting the electric lamps up to April 1904. But as autumn approached further difficulties arose. On 3 October 1904 the Commissioners issued a directive "that all the available lamps be lighted with oil and a committee consisting of the members present inspect them on Tuesday and regulate for lighting the streets."

"In Case the Electric plant offers for sale", according to a minute of 31 October 1904, "the Town Commissioners request to know have they Borrowing powers to secure money to purchase same".¹¹ The lighting of Fethard's streets from Mr. Webb's plant was now at an end. At the Commissioners' meeting of 30 January 1905 a letter of his stated that he declined to carry out the terms of his contract. In any event, throughout the winter of 1904/05 the town had been lit by oil lamps.

These had ceased being lit on 15 April 1905, after which they were taken down, inspected and stored in the Market House. A news item in the *Clonmel Nationalist* of 1 February 1905 records that Mr. Webb, the owner of the electric system, gave notice to the urban council that he intended discontinuing the supply of electricity to the street lamps. No reason is given for his doing so.

The lighting of Fethard's streets by oil lamps began again on 18 September 1905; on this occasion William Morrissey agreed to light and maintain them for a fee of £1 a month. In the following year the lighting began on 10 September, with Morrissey still attending to the lamps, but his fee had now risen to £1. 5s. a month.

However, having experienced the benefits of electric light the Commissioners could hardly be satisfied with oil. On 20 September 1907 they granted permission to a Mr. Haines to erect poles about the streets for electric light. On 11 October 1907 terms were agreed for the lighting of the streets with 20 electric lights. A three-year contract was signed at a cost of £52. 10s. a year.



It is not known if Haines's project ever began. On 6 January 1908 the Commissioners ordered a waterproof coat for the lamp lighter, and a minute of 3 February 1908 states "That the Bankruptcy Court be written telling them that 6 Arc Lamps are the property of the Town Commissioners." Another company, The Electric Light Co., now proposed lighting the town during the winter months of 1908/09, for which they would charge £52. 10s. a year. For the remainder of 1908 the Electric Light Company were paid £26. 5s. for a half-year's electricity, a deduction of £3 being made from this amount for reasons not specified. It seems that this company also lit a number of private houses. On 1 February 1909 it was paid £10. 10s. for erecting poles and wires in The Valley.

An agreement was signed by a Mr. R. H. Randolph on behalf of the Electric Light Company and sanctioned by the Commissioners on 15 March 1909. From 1 September 1908 the street lamps were to be lit from the fourth night after the full moon to the first quarter of the following moon. All lamps would be the property of the Commissioners; there were eight large lamps and 18 double-bracket lamps in the town. For the supply of electricity the new contractor agreed on a payment of £52. 10s. a year.

At the Commissioners' meeting of 4 September 1911 a directive was made that "Electric Light" commence on 15 September and end of 15 May and that the streets be lit every night continually from dusk to midnight and for all night on the night preceding a fair day. So for the first time in its long history the town was brightly lit every winter night, an extra benefit for traders and shopkeepers who could now keep their businesses open until a late hour. In 1911 the electric plant on the outskirts of the town became the property of a Mr. E. A. Steward, who continued to operate it up to 1914. Electricity had now come to Fethard as a permanent form of street lighting; never again would there be oil lamps.

FOOTNOTES

1. 9 Geo. IV, c. 82.
2. My thanks are due to Mr. Patrick Holland, Curator, Museum, Clonmel for allowing me access to the minute books.
3. 17 & 18 Victoria, c. 103.
4. 61 & 62 Victoria, c. 37.
5. Its neighbour, Clonmel, had been illuminated by gas lamps as early as 19 Oct. 1824 by the London Gas Company. The 130 lamps supplied had cost £3. 17s. 6d. each (Burke, *Clonmel*, 212). Tipperary town had 18 gas lamps in 1876. These were lit from 4 Sept. to 4 May, but not on the five moonlit nights in each month. The cost of lighting was £3. 17s. per lamp for each period. Carrick-on-Suir was lit from 10 Sept. to 10 April, and from six in the evening to five the following morning; the town had also 20 oil-lamps which were lit over the same period at a cost of £22. 2s. 7d.
6. Bassett, *Book of Tipperary*, 121.
7. In 1872 it was costing £30 to light the streets of Thurles; there the light was supplied from gas. Kennedy, *Thurles* (Thurles, 1941), 6.
8. An invoice in the writer's possession.
9. During the mid-1800s a number of investors encouraged the creation of light from electric current, but what was developed proved impractical. Several lighting pioneers had discovered incandescent lamps that were powered by batteries; these, however, burned out quickly. To make widespread use of cheap electricity, not only was a lamp essential but also the distribution of current to the user's lamp. Thomas A. Edison in 1879 developed a workable method of distribution and a useable incandescent lamp. This had a filament of carbonised thread to give it longer life. In the early 1880s Edison operated the first power plant to generate and distribute electricity. This plant, in New York City, began its operations in 1882. The first public supply in Great Britain was established in Goldalming, Surrey in 1881.



10. Knowles, *History of Fethard*, 3, 51.
11. On 16 June 1896 an Act was passed granting urban authorities the right to borrow money "to facilitate and regulate the supply of electricity for lighting and other purposes". An earlier Electric Lighting Act of 1882 had conferred similar "benefits" on local authorities. There is no reference to Fethard having borrowed money to help in lighting the streets.

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