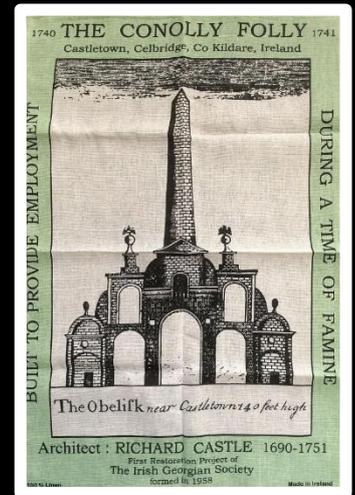




The 'Forgotten' Famine of 1740-41

The Widow Conolly's Folly located at Grangewilliam near Celbridge, Co.Kildare was an example of a relief scheme to provide work for local people during the famine of 1739-41. *(Images from Wikipedia).*



The River Shannon at Portumna, Co. Galway. Imagine this scene, with the water frozen to a depth of 19 inches? This happened in the winter of 1739-40.

(Image from discoverloughderg.ie.)

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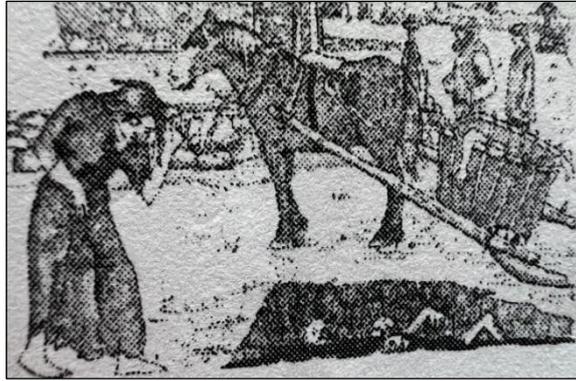
This project is supported by the Department of Rural and Community Development and Pobal through the Community Services Programme

The 'Forgotten' Famine of 1740-41

We are familiar with the horrific history of the Great Famine of 1845-49. It has been the subject of countless books, studies, debate, even films. But 115 years before 1845, a terrible, seismic famine struck Ireland.

Largely due to a lack of records, it has much less prominence in our history. In 1739, there were about 2.4 million people on the island of Ireland. **Unlike the 1840s, the main crops were wheat and oats, while the potato played an important, but yet less prominent role.**

During the 1730s, winters had been mild. That was to change drastically in 1739. As that cold, dry, bleak winter turned to 1740 a severe frost gripped the country. All of the major rivers in the east and midlands of the country, including the Liffey and the Boyne froze over.



Burial of famine victims at Kilkasheen Cillín and 1740-41 Famine Burial Ground, Moveen, Co. Clare.
Image from Dickson, D. 1997. *Arctic Ireland: The Extraordinary Story of the Great Frost and Forgotten Famine of 1740-41*. White Row Press, Belfast.

Parts of the Lee and the Shannon, which had ice as thick as 19 inches near Portumna¹, were also affected. Initially, people made use of this novelty: they could cross the rivers easily. The Dublin Evening Post carried a story of an open-air ball held on the surface of the Boyne, with "several country dances on the ice, being attended by a large band of music"².

But the damage soon took hold. **It is believed that outdoor temperatures were as low as -18 degrees Celsius.**³ A thaw came in March 1740, but it revealed that virtually all of the potatoes from 1739, stored in covered pits for the winter, both for food and to provide the seed for the crop of 1740, had been destroyed. The thaw was no respite, cold drying winds blew for much of the spring of 1740. Cattle and sheep began to die in the fields. The corn and wheat planted the previous autumn failed. In Dublin, where coal was relied upon for heating, the port had been frozen over, and the coal bearing boats from Britain could not enter. When the port thawed and supply resumed, the price of coal soared. People scavenged everything they could find as a source of fuel or food. The decimation of food supply in rural Ireland led to a mass migration of destitute people towards the towns, which were not able to cope.

At intervals, there were riots over food. Attempts were made to relieve the suffering, but these tended to be localised, and there was no concerted, island-wide relief measure.⁴

North Mayo Heritage Centre

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Tue, Wed, Thur: 10am - 4pm, Fri: 10am - 1pm

Bright Sky Café

Thur, Fri, Sat, Sun, Mon: 10am – 3pm

Organic Produce

Tue, Wed, Thur 12pm – 3.30pm

Such was the shortage of grains, the Catholic Church relaxed its Lenten strictures and allowed Catholics to eat meat four days a week.

This was largely pointless, however, as most people could not afford to eat meat regularly, and it was not a part of most people's everyday diet. The autumn and winter of 1740 saw more terrible conditions. There were blizzards in the east of the country. On the 9th of December 1740, there was a widespread downpour, which caused flooding, followed by another severe cold snap.

There was a shortage of milk, essential to the diet, as cows had been weakened by the previous months' ordeal.

As is always the case with famine, it is not so much hunger that kills, but the diseases brought on by the lack of nutrition.

Those in positions of local power, especially the landed gentry, began to see that, while the better off might not go hungry, disease would show no respect to social class. Dickson, the foremost scholar on this catastrophe, estimated that, despite the poor standard of record keeping, it could be stated that between **13% and 20% of the population of 2.4 million perished as a result of this famine.** That equates to between 312,000 and 480,000 people. 1741 became known as '*Blian an Air*', the year of slaughter. Dysentery and typhus played a major role in the death toll.⁵

In the spring of 1741, ships carrying grain from British North America (the American Declaration of Independence was still 35 years into the future) arrived into Galway. The food shortage began to lessen, and prices fell. The harvest that year was mixed, but enough to get by. Gradually, throughout the 1740s, the food supply stabilised.

SOURCES:

¹ The Connaught Telegraph, the 26th of April 2020

² The Irish Independent, the 4th of March 2018

³ Dickson, D. 1997. *Arctic Ireland: The Extraordinary Story of the Great Frost and Forgotten Famine of 1740-41*. White Row Press, Belfast.

⁴ From waterfordtreasures.com

⁵ McWilliams, B. 2001. The Great Frost and Forgotten Famine. The Irish Times, the 19th of February 2001