

In writing the story of St Marys Church, Listowel we take note of the chronology provided by Dr Pádraig de Brún<sup>1</sup> and supplement it with some additional information.

Listowel

‘The tower in the cemetery was the Catholic Church long ago, but the Catholics were hunted out of it. The Church went out as far as the present road. That was the village of Listowel at the time. The Catholics got a cabin in Tay Lane then, and Mass was read there. The cabin was somewhere on the Square side of the ‘Glaise’. The cabin was at the back somewhere of where the Provincial Bank is now, and Paddy Kennelly had the house or the cabin after on licence. Old McElligott had the contract of the present chapel when it was built in my father’s time. The stone came from where they pump the water now in Listowel. The spire was built in my day. It began in the summer of 1865 and it was finished in 1866.’<sup>2</sup>

1777

*‘On the Listowhill rental is a tenement called the Masshouse, which pays forty Shillings per Annum. Your Lordship probably does not know that Land is generally given for such uses Rent free, a Circumstance I should have long ago acquainted you with but that I waited your final Determination about the new Town, intending to mention some private place for that purpose and not expecting so long a delay to it. The Rent it now pays was first assumed to the Rep<sup>ves</sup> of my Grandfather out of a tenement, the small garden of which was afterwards let by the Undertenant to the popish inhabitants of the Parish who built their Masshouse on it. The Tenement has been some time in a state of ruin. Perhaps your Lordship may think that rent should not be demanded for it.’<sup>3</sup>*

1777

*‘I certainly would not have you demand any Rent for the tenement called the Mass House. You say it is customary to grant Land rent free for such purposes and I certainly will not break through the custom. Peoples consciences should be untax’d and tho’ one should take the utmost pains to convince the lower people of their errors in point of religious opinions, yet thus far and no farther should one go..’<sup>4</sup>*

[James Julian, whose will was proved in 1726<sup>5</sup> held ‘Listowhill’ on a lease for lives dated 31 May 1708, which lasted until the death of the third life, Elizabeth Shewell (née Julian), on 27 Dec. 1775.<sup>6</sup> The property then reverted to Lord Kerry, who set some

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<sup>1</sup> De Brun, Pádraig; He has kindly allowed us to use his research in preparing this Church history.

<sup>2</sup> Kennelly, Jerry, ‘Memories of north Kerry – from the folklore of Jerry Kennelly’, *Shannonside Annual* 1959, 13–18

<sup>3</sup> Paris Archives Nationales, Rev. Christopher Julian [agent] to Earl of Kerry, 22<sup>nd</sup> Nov. 1777, T451/6, Alger, ‘Irish Absentee’, 673

<sup>4</sup> Paris Archives Nationales, Lord Kerry to Julian [agent] , 15<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1777, An 451/8/1/10.

<sup>5</sup> Vicars, Sir Arthur (ed.), *Index to the prerogative wills of Ireland, 1536–1810* (Dublin: Ponsonby, 1897), p.257

<sup>6</sup> Beatty, Beartha, De Brún, Pádraig, (ed.), *Kerry Memories* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., xvii n.2)

plans in train for a new town, but these came to nothing.<sup>7</sup> Rentals survive for the years 1776/7 -1782/3, those for 1778-9 and later making the Mass House as rent free]

1778

*‘No place has been allotted for the Pound of Mass-house. They would have interfered with the Order and Regularity of the Plan if thrown into the town. Some convenient and more proper situation will be found for both on the South side of the Road leading to Ennismore or Abbeyfeale.’<sup>8</sup>*

‘The Diocese of Kerry’ by the Rev. Donal A. Reidy in 1937 only mentions Listowel in the context of the martyrdom of ‘Friar Gerald Fitzgerald O.P. sub prior of Kilmallock was captured by Williamite forces near Listowel and summarily executed’ and ‘Thaddeus Clancy, co. Limerick, was arrested effused to announce his religion and was speared and beheaded. His head was taken to Listowel and exposed to the mockery of heretics’.

1797

Signatories to a letter to Rome regarding successor to Bishop Gerald Teahan (d. July 1797), include ‘Dionysius O’Sullivan V.F. Pastor Sanctae Crucis de Listowel’<sup>9</sup> Possible indicating a new building – the chapel was certainly on the site of the present church by 1810 (see below) Parish registers date from 1802 (Baptisms) and 1805 (Marriages).



Figure 1 Baptismal Record 1802

<sup>7</sup> Paris Archives Nationales, Alger, ‘Irish Absentee’, (667-8)

<sup>8</sup> Paris Archives Nationales, Rev. Christopher Julian [agent] to Lord Kerry, 1<sup>st</sup> Jan. 1778, AN T451/6.

<sup>9</sup> De Brún, Pádraig, Journal of Kerry Architectural and Historical Society, 18, (1985/1986) P.110

1810

Larkins map indicates a church structure at the present site at that time, ('Lisstowel', T-Shaped chapel at site of present church.)<sup>10</sup>

1811/12



Figure 2 Nimmo Map of Listowel

(Nimmo) Chapel, site of present church. (cross shape under castle in above map)

(Alexander Nimmo, maps prepared for Commission of inquiry into bogs in Ireland, 1811–14

(Arnold Horner, 'Napoleon's Irish legacy – the Bogs Commissioners', *History Ireland* 13/3 (2005) 24–8; two Kerry sections published in Arnold Horner, *Iveragh in 1811: Alexander Nimmo's map for the Bogs Commissioners* (Dublin 2002) and idem, *Kenmare River in 1812: Alexander Nimmo's map for the Bogs Commissioners* (Dublin 2003)))

1824

(Pigot & Co. Directory, 294 [Listowel]) 'The Catholic chapel, also<sup>11</sup> situate in the square, is a capacious modern building with a handsome simple exterior, well becoming a religious edifice.'

<sup>10</sup> Arnold Horner, 'William Larkin and the mapping of Kerry roads 200 years ago', *Kerry Magazine* 12 (2012) 21–3

<sup>11</sup> As well as the [Protestant] church 'being built in the centre of a neat square'. The Accounts relating to Church Establishment of Ireland, 1801–1822, under churched built lists a 1<sup>st</sup> loan for the building of the Listowel [Protestant] church in 1814 of £800 to L Church, a second loan is issued in 1818 of £200 to John Church. And in 1816 a sum was advanced as a gift towards the building of the church £500, paid to the Bishop of Limerick. The Table of Parochial records in the appendix of the 13<sup>th</sup> report of the Deputy, lists the following for Listowel [Protestant] Church 4 volumes of records, Baptisms 1790–1875, Marriages 1790–1845 & Deaths 1790–1875

1825

Dr Egan, Roman Catholic Bishop held a confirmation at the Chapel in Listowel, on Tuesday, after which he delivered a very impressive and excellent speech in Irish to the crowds of country people, who has assembled from all quarters.<sup>12</sup>

1826

‘At a meeting of the Roman Catholic Clergy and inhabitants of Listowel, a vote of grateful thanks has been returned to Lord Ennismore, for his unsolicited liberal and munificent offer of building a part of the Chapel of Listowel, which is estimated over £370, with a promise of not losing sight of this rising edifice, until he witnesses its completion.’<sup>13</sup>

1829

Fr Darby Mahony wrote to Lord Listowel on 6<sup>th</sup> of November begging his ‘Lordship for a subscription in aid of the fund insufficient in its present amount to finish our house of worship. I need not describe its wretched state to you as I am told it has been inspected by your Lordship when last in Listowel. It is not only insecure but it is not at all large enough to contain our number of persons who frequent it on Sundays and holidays...the necessity of making every exertion to finish the new building which has been commenced a good many years since’ This indicates that he is talking about a new building on the site of an older.

1830

Fr Mahony placed an advert for the building of the church, noting that only those builders satisfied in being paid in three stages need apply. The first payment when the walls and gable were built, the second when the building was roofed and the final when ‘a competent judge the works properly executed.’<sup>14</sup>

1837

(Lewis) ‘The chapel was built at an expense of £2000 on a site at the south –western angle of the square, given by the Earl of Listowel; it is a handsome and spacious cruciform structure, with a good portico, and the alter-piece is richly embellished’.

1842/6 (OS 6”) RC Chapel (Cruciform)



<sup>12</sup> *Freemans journal*, 6<sup>th</sup> September, 1825

<sup>13</sup> *The southern Reporter and Cork Commercial Courier*, 14<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1826 [www.findmypast.ie, accessed 4.06.15]

<sup>14</sup> *Tralee Mercury*, 09<sup>th</sup> January 1830



1851

(Archdeacon John O'Sullivan, diary, 29-30 July) 'Mahony [Jeremiah Mahony, PP Listowel 1829-56] will be the first to censor his neighbour for a filthy disorderly chapel and yet he is notorious for having the filthiest in Kerry...

'What a chapel! Dirty, filthy, neglected, they do not express the state of it. It was enough to make one melancholy. All the windows literally frittered away, the front one facing the square stopped up with boards. Ivy completely darkening up the one over the altar. Cobwebs! Such cobwebs!!!...Then for the last twenty years, as a parishioner in the yard told me, a heap of flags are scattered in the yard, more of them lying in the slob at Tarbert to flag the chapel;, and yet Mahony will have it in holes and undulations and still he is among the foremost to find fault with others.'

1852

While the Rev. Darby Mahony was not free from criticism the following folklore from the Shannon side Annual 1859 P.16 by Jerry Kennelly shows his status 'There was a house in Church St belonging to Burke and there was a deal yard at the back. While the people were at mass a child of the family carried a "smeachaide" out and made a fire in the deal yard and the whole place went on fire. When they were at mass a fine spring day, the fourth of April 1852; Then two houses burned and a thatched house in Taylane. There was a pump in the tar yard kept by Tim Harnett, where the National Bank is at present and the pump ran dry. The whole town would be burnt only for Father Darby Mahony. He stood before the fire reading his book over it. Fr Darby Mahony was one of the Mahonys of Dunloe. He was a captain in the army before he went for the Church. He had only his books to bury him when he died and there never was greater mourning then there was by the poor of the town after him'

He was active during the Famine period and was the driving force in getting the Presentation Nuns to come to Listowel in the early 1840s. There is a very attractive window and plaque dedicated to him in the corner at the right side of the high altar (See Photo)



Figure 3 Window dedicated to Fr Darby Mahony



Figure 4 Plaque to the memory of Fr Darby Mahony

1852

The Griffith valuation of the town of Listowel gives the RC Chapel and yard as having 1 rood & 5 Perches (5s) Valuation £35 and its location is shown on the accompanying map

This was the end of the main worst effects of the Famine here, the population was greatly improvised and there would have been very little money for Church building and Maintenance.

1854

(Moriarty diary, 16 July) 'Visitation Listowel...Church in a very unfinished and neglected state.'

1859

(*Key to Ecclesiastical Map*) Listowel chapel, Listowel par.

1864

(Moriarty diary, 5 June) 'Visitation Listowel...Church and all belonging to it in perfect order.'

1865

(Moriarty diary, 6 Jan.) [Listowel:] 'Attended a meeting of the Church committee. The building of front and tower agreed on.'

#### LISTOWEL CATHOLIC CHURCH.

The Very Rev. M. J. M'Donnell, P.P., V.F., at first mass on last Sunday gratefully acknowledged the receipt of £10 from Sir John Walsh, Bart.; M.P., through George Sandes, Esq., who subscribed himself £2 for the work in progress, enlarging, and ornamenting the Catholic Church of Listowel. The Very Rev. the Vicar stated that it

rendered the gift more valuable its being unsolicited. This is an example to other landlords whose tenants avail themselves of our chapel, and who have not as yet subscribed.-- Correspondent.<sup>15</sup>

1865/6

The directory of Irish Architect has the following entry: Pugin & Ashlin 'Extension to the W. New W front with tower & spire, interior porch with organ loft, rose Window'<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> *Tralee Chronicle*, 19<sup>th</sup> May 1865

<sup>16</sup> D.C. Hennessy wrote a poem in his book 'the Lays of North Kerry' (reprint 2001) depicting the new external additions to the church. Hennessy was blind from some time in his teens; he died on 23 April 1884. The lines of the poem are: 'I fair would have an artist's power, to sketch in colours, bright and fair, that magnificent spire and tower, which now adorns our house of prayer, of which our town and parish may, Be justly proud and glad to day.'

Local limestone with Kanturk Limestone dressings. Columns at entrance of Aberdeen granite. Contractor James Scanlon, Elgin Rd, Dublin. Wrought Iron cross designed by architects and executed by Hodges and Son, Westmoreland St. The dictionary mentions an undated watercolour perspective view of the west front (draughtsman, J. Hevey)<sup>17</sup>

'Extensive improvements are being carried out at the Roman Catholic Church, Listowel, from designs by Messrs. Pugin and Ashlin. The church has been extended towards the square, and a new gabled front, built with tower and spire at eastern angle. The principal entrance is a handsome doorway in front gable, which has an interior porch, over which is the organ gallery; over front doorway is a niche, springing from carved corbel and shaft of polished limestone, at each side of which is a two-light window, and overhead in centre of gable circular window 6 feet diameter. The entrance to organ gallery is by a deeply recessed doorway in front of tower, which has a stone stairs and balustrade to level of gallery; the lower part of tower is to be used as a baptistry, and the bell-stage has a large bell, by Murphy, of Dublin. The dressings to doors, windows, weatherings, bands, &c, are of Kanturk white limestone and local dark limestone for walling; the columns to principal doorway are of polished Aberdeen granite; the spire is of white limestone, with bands of dark stone, and the height of tower and spire is 115 feet. Mr. James Scanlan, Builder.'<sup>18</sup>

1866

(Moriarty diary, 24 June) 'Confirmed in Listowel 224... F<sup>r</sup> McDonnell P.P. is building a beautiful tower and spire. His church is very neat.

1866

'Messrs White, 27 York St, Dublin, have just erected one of their justly celebrated organs in the Catholic Church of Listowel....The organ was opened on yesterday (Sunday)...At Vespers, Misses Kelly, and Halpin and Messrs Hayes and Roche, members of the local choir sang with great effect Bellini's *O Salutaris*, *Litany of the Blessed Virgin* and *Lingarelli's Laudate*...' <sup>19</sup>

'The additions, consisting of a new west front and spire, to the Catholic Church, Listowel, Co. Kerry, are rapidly approaching completion. The spire is almost finished, wanting only the addition of the beautiful wrought iron cross, from the works of Messrs. Hodges and Sons, Westmoreland-street, Dublin. The cross was made from the design of Messrs. Pugin and Ashlin, the architects to the church, and is a very creditable specimen of native workmanship. A novel feature in the spire is the four spirelets, rising at the broach, the effect of which is good. The details of the works are

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<sup>17</sup> The watercolour was up at auction at James Adams., St Stephens green, Dublin on 1/12/09, lot 194, it was purchased for €220

<sup>18</sup> *Dublin Builder*, 15<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1865

<sup>19</sup> *Tralee Chronicle*, 30<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1866

being carried out with spirit and effect, and great credit is due to the architects, and to Mr. James Scanlan, of Elgin-road, Dublin, for the faultless manner in which he has carried out the designs.’<sup>20</sup>

1866

‘His entire solicitude was for the welfare of his people and beautifying of the chapel. Under his fostering care it has undergone a complete and most pleasing transformation. The uneven earthen floor, with its clouds of dust choking the congregation on summer Sundays, has given way to a splendid tiled one; the humble wooden alter, with its equally humble and scanty ornamentation has been replaced by a splendid marble structure, majestically decorated; while a splendid stained glass window and monument attest that he appreciated the good works of his immediate predecessor, the lamented Father Mahony, to whose memory they are raised. Its primitive and dilapidated front, which stood out in humiliating contrast to the Protestant Church over the way, has been substituted by a beautiful and costly one in a niche in which is a much –admired statue of the Blessed Virgin, to whom the Church is dedicated. The spire, which is the design of the most eminent architect of his day, is considered to be the handsomest in the kingdom- a monument alike to Canon McDonnell’s memory and the fidelity and generosity of the people.’<sup>21</sup>

The remains of the Cannon lay in state in his room, which is visited by hundred. His internment takes place on Tuesday (today) in the Church. He was so much loved. There is no trace of his grave or that of Fr Darby Mahony in the church today.

Another notable Parish Priest of Listowel was Canon Thomas Davis (1882-1911). Canon Davis is buried at the top of the nave of the Church in front of the high alter and a large inscribed slab covers his tomb. In his will he left ‘the residue of his estate to be expended improving RC Parochial church, Listowel.’ There are two windows dedicated to him in the Church. One is the large window on the Left side isle and the other is at the left of the main alter. The plaque on the alter left side states ‘the adjoining sanctuary window and slab over his grave were erected by his grateful parishioners to perpetuate the memory of the very Rev Canon Thos Davis P.P.V.V., Listowel, 1882-1911 who enlarged the Church and left his means for its further improvement. In 1886 Wilfred Scawen Blunt wrote about a visit to Ireland during the land war, he recorded his experiences in Kerry and he mentions Canon Davis in relation to evictions going on; Davis gave him information on the Landlords and about ‘Another day of evictions.’<sup>22</sup>

Yesterday, the Sheriff was assisted in his work by a wretch of the name of Callaghan, who had been bribed to point out the houses to the agent, for S\_\_\_\_\_ was not there himself and was represented by a young chap from Dublin in a check suit who did not know the country. Today Callaghan did not appear, having I believe, been got at by Canon Davis and shown the error of his ways’

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<sup>20</sup> *Dublin Builder*, 15<sup>th</sup> June 1866, P.160

<sup>21</sup> Obituary of Canon MI J McDonnell, PP Listowel 1856-77. *Tralee Chronicle*, 16 Oct. 1877

Note this is the first we find a reference to the Church being dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, the initial chapel was dedicated the ‘Sanctae Crucis of Listowel’

<sup>22</sup> Blunt, Scawen, Wilfred, *The Land war in Ireland*, (London, MCMXII), PP.125-127.



The S\_\_\_\_\_ mentioned was George Sands, the notorious agent who lived very close to the Church in Listowel.

The following items re: the main reconstructions in subsequent years are taken from the Directory of Irish Builders ending in 1956, these detail the major changes over the 1865/66 to 1907 period.

**Name:** PUGIN & ASHLIN  
**Building:** CO. KERRY, LISTOWEL, CHURCH OF ST MARY (RC)  
**Date:** 1865-66  
**Nature:** Extension to W. New W front with tower & spire, interior porch with organ loft, rose window. Local limestone with Kanturk limestone dressings. Columns at entrance of Aberdeen granite. Contractor: James Scanlan, Elgin Rd, Dublin. Wrought iron cross designed by architects & executed by Hodges & Son, Westmoreland St.

**Refs:** Undated watercolour perspective view of W front (draughtsman: T. Hevey) in sale at James Adam, St Stephen's Green, Dublin, 1st Dec 2009, lot 194; em>DB 7, 15 Oct 1865, 251; 8, 15 Jun 1866, 160

**Name:** ASHLIN & COLEMAN  
**Building:** CO. KERRY, LISTOWEL, CHURCH OF ST MARY (RC)  
**Date:** 1907-1911  
**Nature:** New chancel, side chapels, aisles &c. Builder: Sisk  
**Refs:** Drawings, 2 dated 1908 and 1910, in IAA, Ashlin & Coleman drawings collection, Acc. 76/1.117/1-9; notes and sketches in Coleman sketchbook B60 in possession of Jones & Kelly, architects (photocopy in IAA, RPB 30); *IB* 49, 21 Sep, 19 Oct 1907, 645, 662, 729; 53, 11 Nov 1911, 758; 63, 5 Nov 1921, 729

**Name:** ASHLIN & COLEMAN  
**Building:** CO. KERRY, LISTOWEL, CHURCH OF ST MARY (RC)  
**Date:** 1921  
**Nature:** Side aisles. Builder: Sisk  
**Refs:** *IB* 63, 5 Nov 1921, 729

**Name:** BARRETT, JAMES RUPERT EDWARD BOYD  
**Building:** CO. KERRY, LISTOWEL, CHURCH OF ST MARY (RC)  
**Date:** 1956  
**Nature:** Additions & renovations.  
**Refs:** *IB* 98, 14 Jul 1956, 655

**Name:** OPPENHEIMER, LUDWIG, LTD \*#  
**Building:** CO. KERRY, LISTOWEL, CHURCH OF ST MARY (RC)  
**Date:** ?  
**Nature:** Mosaic work on sanctuary walls (and pavement?) and side chapels  
**Refs:** Oppenheimer brochure, 1915ca (information from Robert Field, Swanage, Dorset, Apr 2013).



Figure 5 Mosaic work in St Marys

Subsequent to the Vatican II Council considerable internal modifications were made particularly to the Sanctuary area, i.e. the alter changed to allow the priest to face the people while saying mass, some statues of saints were removed and after a period we lost one lovely pulpit as it was redundant.



Figure 6 Photo courtesy of Stephen Keane Stack ; Pre Vatican II alter and pulpit on left

In 2014 a new floor was installed, along with replacing underfloor heating pipes and some electrical changes. A camera system to live stream church service was also installed.

Our current knowledge is somewhat deficient on the Church fittings, we do not know who made the Calvary, the Stations of the Cross, the Alter, however the mosaics were provided by the firm of Oppenheimer of Manchester, some of the windows by Mayer of Munich as was the statue of St Mary on the front exterior of the Church. Research is

ongoing in this area. The big window over the high altar donated by the women of the Parish in 1908.



Figure 7 Calvary in St Marys



Figure 8 Stations of the Cross

Parish Priests of Listowel:

Very Rev. James O'Connor – deposed on 1478

(Canon) William Fitzmaurice, - Took over from James O'Connor in 1478

Gerald Stack, 1493

Macarius Falvey, c 1634

Patrick Kennelly, c. 1704

James Walsh, 1802-10 (Murher united with Listowel in 1803)

Michael O'Sullivan, 1810-29 (Murher separated from Listowel 1829)

Jeremiah (Darby) O'Mahony, 1826-1856 – remains buried in St Marys

(Canon) Michael J McDonnell, 1856-1877 – remains buried in St Marys

Arthur Moynihan, 1878-82

(Canon) Thomas Davis, 1882-1911 - remains buried in St Marys

(Canon) Denis J O'Riordan, 1911-18

(Canon) Denis O'Connor, 1918-28 – remains buried in Listowel cemetery

(Canon) Patrick White, 1928-35 - remains buried in Listowel cemetery

(Canon) Patrick J Fitzgerald, 1935-40 - remains buried in Listowel cemetery

(Canon) John S Dillon, 1940-43- remains buried in Listowel cemetery

(Canon) Patrick J Brennan, 1943-54- remains buried in Listowel cemetery

(Msgr) Peter O'Sullivan, 1954-73

(Msgr) James Sheahan, 1973- 85

(Msgr) Michael Leahy, 1986-96

(Canon) James Linnane, 1996-2010

(Canon) Declan O'Connor, 2010-Present

## The Presentation & Mercy Sisters

In 1841 building began on the convent and the presentation nuns were invited to Listowel. Work completed on the convent two years later and it was officially opened on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1844 by Bishop Cornelius Egan. Four nuns arrived to Listowel from Miltown, they were Mother Mary Teresa Kelly, Mother Mary F Xavier Brennan, Sr Mary Francis McCarthy and Sr Mary Augustine Stack, and the latter was a native of Listowel. The 8<sup>th</sup> May was deemed the foundation day. The Presentation nuns opened a school later in the month of May; over 300 children were registered on the first day, the numbers quickly increased to 500. They were later joined by the first postulant (admitted to religious orders, but prepares for life as a professed nun) in Listowel convent and other nuns

During the Famine, the nuns were given donations by both family and from Rome and food to distribute to the children. The food mainly came from the Society of Friends. Through the influence of Rev Mahony, Captain Sparks charged with the distribution of the relief funds for the area, ordered the supply of rye bread to feed 400 daily.

Fever and Consumption took four lives of the nuns in the convent between 1848 and 1850.

The Mercy Sister arrived in Listowel in 1883, where the Presentation nuns worked for education and during the famine fed the children that arrived daily, the Mercy Sisters worked in the health sector. The sanitary conditions in the Fever hospital were appalling before their arrival. As well as working in the Fever hospital they also worked in the general wards. A chapel was erected in the upper dining hall. The Southern Health Board reconstructed this chapel in 1977-8 aided by local contributions<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Pierse, John D., *Teampall Ban, Aspects of the Famine in North Kerry, 1845-1852*, (Listowel, 2014), extract pp 70-79.