

The 1947 Flood

To be read by the teacher

If you read the newspaper headlines in the spring of 1947, you get a good idea of what kind of weather we had in Ireland then. Here are some from *The Irish Times*:

‘Violent Storm Swept Ireland’ 5th January

‘Floods in Many Areas as Rainstorm Sweeps over Ireland’ 9th January

‘Widespread Snow and More Expected’ 28th January

‘Coldest Weather for Years as Freeze-Up Continues’ 31st January

‘Still Colder Weather Predicted’ 13th February

‘Worst Blizzard for 25 Years Hits Ireland’ 26th February

‘Many Parts of the South Hit by Snowstorm’ 5th March

Our own Kilkenny People had this to say about the weather on February 3rd.

Kilkenny, like most parts of the country, experienced one of the worst snow storms for many years last week-end, when the city and county was covered to a depth of about six inches. Further snow fell on Wednesday, but thawed rapidly, but there was a return of the arctic conditions when snow fell to a depth of a couple of inches in many parts of the county on Thursday.



Photograph from Rothe House Collection

People probably thought that the weather couldn't get worse, but on Sunday March 16th, there was heavy rain followed by a thick fall of snow. According to the *Kilkenny People* 'this caused large banks of snow all over the county to thaw quickly.' All of the extra water in the River Nore made it rise around 5 o'clock and between 6 and 7 o'clock, the river, already in flood, rose even higher. In the houses along John's Quay, all of the downstairs rooms flooded, forcing the families to go upstairs to escape the flood. A number of local men using small fishing boats called cots, set out to rescue these families. Special mention was made of four men all from Maudlin Street who risked their lives to save the families affected by the

flood. They were Kevin and Michael Shortall (brothers) Pearse Clooney, and Michael McGuinness. This is how the reporter in the *Kilkenny People* saw what happened:

The river was like a rushing tornado of whirling waters. Boats were tossed about like corks on the mighty currents. I saw and marvelled at the work which the men in the two small cots were doing. Quickly, they went back and forth taking the people out of the houses to safety. It was indeed a dangerous task and I have the greatest admiration for the four young life-savers who dared the awful current of water surrounding the houses. It took several hours to save all of the families and as soon as the last person was safe, the boatmen set off up Michael Street on their way to Green St. to offer their services. The flood was so bad at Green's Bridge that only one boat could get into Green St. and here again the boatmen did wonderful work.



Traditional River Nore Cot - Photograph by kind permission of Joe Dunphy

The water was so high in Green Street, that one family had to be rescued through the roof! Strong currents on the river made the rescue operation very difficult. At one point, Kevin Shorthall and Michael McGuinness were rescuing families and were 'catapulted' out of their boats into the river by the strong current. Luckily, both were rescued and brought to a



Fr. O'Rourke

nearby home to dry off and get some hot food and drink. A 'pleasure boat' belonging to Mr John Duggan was taken over for the rescue mission and manned by three men, John Grace, from Dean Street, Barney Kelly and Mr Fitzpatrick from Butts Green. These men set out to rescue the families in Dean St, Irishtown, Blackmill St, and Abbey St. Many local Catholic priests, such as Monsignor Dean Cavanagh comforted the families who were being rescued. Fr J O'Rourke from St Canice's Church, said the rosary and the people who were gathered around joined in.

A footbridge which crossed the River Nore at Talbot's Inch was swept away by the raging river and never replaced.

The Breagh River, which flows into the Nore, overflowed into the houses of Irishtown, Dean St, Abbey St and Blackmill St. Inside the Black Abbey the water rose 4.5 metres and the seats and wooden confession boxes floated around in the floodwater.



Photograph from Rothe House Collection

Many homes and businesses were utterly destroyed by the flood. In many cases there was no time to take special belongings. After World War II there was a shortage of certain goods and every home was given a ration book which showed how much tea, sugar, meat, butter, etc, that the family was allowed to buy.¹ People needed these books to do their shopping, so when they were swept away in the storm, it was very distressing for the family.

The casks or barrels belonging to Smithwicks brewery were swept away in the flood and the brewery put an ad in the paper asking people to return any casks that they find. In John St., pieces of timber and furniture floated around in the flood and crashed into the shop windows of Mr Fitzmaurice's Café and Clohessey's grocery shop. Neighbours and friends not only helped in rescuing people but also valuable goods that were in shops. Patrick Cleere, who owned a grocer wholesale business in Vicar St, put an advertisement in the paper thanking the people who helped save his goods during the flood.



Photograph from Rothe House Collection

All in all, about 191 houses were affected by the flood. Many families who had to leave their homes were brought to the army barracks or the Central Hospital, which was the old workhouse, situated near McDonagh Junction Shopping Centre. A special fund was started up to help families who had lost everything in the flood. The Catholic Bishop, Dr Collier, gave £100 and asked people to give as generously as they could. For a few weeks after the flood, lists of names of people who gave money to this fund appeared in *The Kilkenny People*.

The 1947 flood has been described as 'the worst flood in living memory.' There are people alive today who remember it. It would be very interesting to talk to them to find out their own personal memory of the flood. Why not find out if there is anyone you could ask about it and record their story?

¹ For rationing, see: www.woodlands-junior.kent.sch.uk/Homework/war/rationing

