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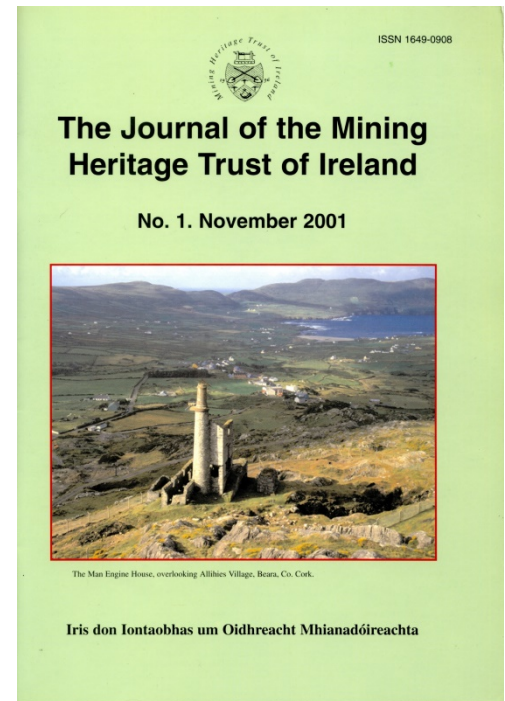
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THE IRON-WORKS OF CO. LAOIS

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Abstract: An historical account is given of the iron works and operations based in and around Monasterevin in County Kildare and Mountrath in County Laois. Recorded working by Sir Charles Coote began in 1620, with iron ore derived from Dysert. A further period of iron working activity is apparent from sources in the 1790s, with numerous forges and blacksmiths located in the Mountmellick district, and in Monasterevin. Some of this iron working was required to produce pikes and weapons for the 1798 rebellion. *Journal of the Mining Heritage Trust of Ireland*, 1, 2001, 55-56.

Whilst writing a history of the parish of Monasterevin, Co. Kildare, "*Monasterevin, a Parish and its People*", it was necessary to research the Battle of Monasterevin in 1798. In doing so I found it necessary amongst other considerations about the battle, to find out about the rebels' weapons and in particular about their pikes, bayonets, pistols and guns, who made them, where were they made, where were the foundries from which the blacksmiths got their metal supplies, and in turn, where was the source of the iron ore. Vast quantities of weapons were produced, exhibits of which may be seen in our local museums today.

The recorded history of iron working and smelting in the area goes back to the 1620 when it was worked by Sir Charles Coote mixing ore from local sources according to a near contemporary account (Boate 1652). Two thirds was from a whitish matrix ("white mine") – "*This stuff is digged out of the ground in lumps the bigness of a man's head — [in which] lieth a small kernal which hath the name of honey comb given to it —*" . This was obtained from two locations "*hard by Mountmellick and two miles from Mountrath*". The other third came from Dysart and was called rock-iron which "*is raised with little trouble for the iron-rock, being full of joints, is with pick axes easily divided and broken into pieces of what bigness one will —*" . The two types of iron were conveyed to Mountrath and there "*mingled and melted together, they had one ton of good iron, called merchants' iron, being not of the first but of the second melting, and hammered into bars and consequently fit for all kinds of use*".

From Dysart to Mountmellick was a distance of six miles, from Dysart to Mountrath 10.4 miles, from Dysart to Monasterevin 11 miles. The down gradient from Dysart to Mountmellick (on the River Owenass) was via the Tirogue Valley and indeed Mountmellick was called "the Valley". The finished bars had to be transported two miles or so from Mountrath to the river Nore where they were loaded into cots (boats made of hollowed-out tree trunks) and sent down river to New Ross and Waterford for export to London.

While the Dysert mine contributed only one third to Coote's operation, it may have been mined by others, or by its owner,

sergeant Major Piggot, to judge by Boates description and this would have produced a cheaper, poorer quality iron. Dysert "*furnished divers great ironworks and could have furnished many more without any notable diminution, seeing that the deepest pits yet made upon it were not above two yards deep*". He goes on to comment on the richness of the overburden of soil.

Those operations came to an end "in the late rebellion" of 1641. They were still closed in the early 1650's when Boate reported on them in the past tense. Sometime thereafter they were reopened and were in full swing by 1690 - sufficient it seems to supply the military although there was some disparity, apparently, between what the merchants of Mounmellick were selling to the public (£20 per ton) and the rate being charged to the army. A letter on behalf of the commander of the government forces, the Earl of Tyrconnell ("my Ld. Duke", etc.), is dated "Dublin, y^e 25th April, '90," and runs thus [quoted in Comerford 1883]:

"Sir - I spoke to my L^d Duke that y^u should sell by y^e tunn some of our Iron in Mountmellick, to the merch^{ts} of Mountmellick at y^e King's rate that they may sell by retail there in their shops for y^e conveniency of y^e country & y^e army who complaine much y^t at this time of need we keep our Iron loct up & will not sell it but at our own leisure & rates, and his Grace commanded me to direct y^u to doe as I proposed, and as it will be of very ill example we should exact more than y^e King's rate, soe it will be necessary y^u will keep a check over those merch^{ts} at Mountmellick y^t they sell y^e Iron they will buy from y^u at a moderate rate by retail proportionably y^u are also of Iron not exceeding half a tunn, those his Lordship sent to receive y^e same payeing for it to y^r ord^r: I am, D^r: S^r: y^r most affectionat humble servant, Dan. Doran."

It is not clear how long that operation lasted but the most likely factor to have ended it would have been the clearing of forests which would have deprived to smelters of fuel. It is surprising therefore to find the ironworks in full swing again a century later at the time of the next period of civic unrest in the 1790s. The references of 1798 make clear that a great deal of

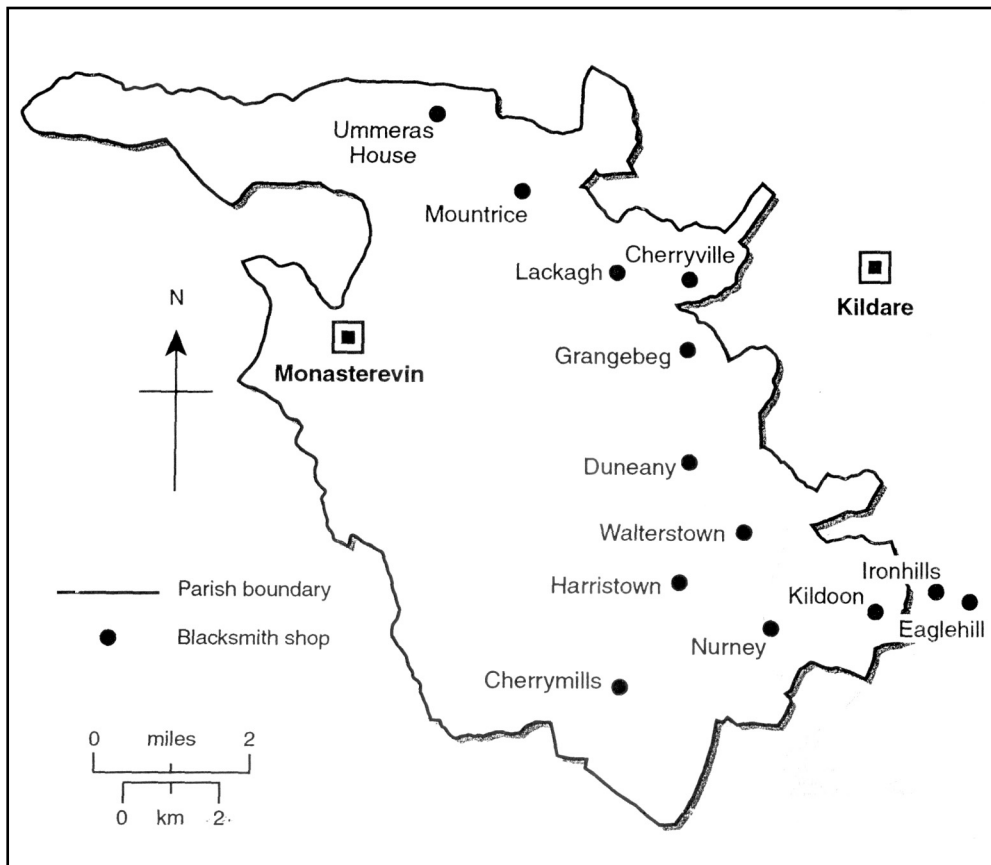


Fig. 1 The location of forges around Monasterevin in the 1790s.

The mining and smelting associated with this could possibly have lasted during the Napoleonic war and died thereafter. Negative evidence (Kane; OS map 1839) suggests that it must have ended well before 1840 although iron mines are marked on the Geological Field sheet of 1835 south of Piggotts Castle and a foundry at Shaen House north of Dysert. There is a local tradition of Dysert reopening in 1854 and there is some supportive evidence to justify this – a passing reference in the *Mining Journal* (1854, P 541) and a pit appearing on the 1889 revision of the 1839 OS map. However, it is possible that this was not a commercial enterprise but tests carried out by James Apjohn on what was then regarded as a new discovery. (Cole 1922).

iron working was taking place at the time. While the most likely source of the raw material was Dysert, there is no direct evidence linking the smelters and forges of the time with mining or quarrying operations

One account of the 1790s describes the River Owenass as having been diverted for water power for the foundries and mills along its banks. The bed of the river was also artificially paved to arrest down-cutting. Many of the streets in Mountmellick bore the name of this activity, such as Forge Lane, Forge Lands, Foundry Street; a man from Wales called Roberts owned the Hibernian Foundry, and Lyon's Foundry was sited in Harbour Street and later removed to Lord Edward Street. Charcoal reportedly was easily obtained from Forest Mountain. There were four blacksmiths in the Main Street, one in Pound Street, one in Forge Lane, two in Ballycolleenbeg, along with a millwright and an engineer who worked in the Hibernian Foundry. There were four ironmongers and hardwaremen with premises in the Main Street.

Further east around Monasterevin it has been possible to plot the forges of the 1790s; they were generally within two miles of each other (Fig. 1). Apparently they had no difficulty in obtaining supplies of pig iron for pike-making. However this was a risky business as anyone suspected or who was caught making pikes was either flogged or executed. Nevertheless the pikes were made of a particular local type. Rather than the axe-like halbert generally associated with the 1798 rebellion, the Kildare version had a twelve-inch spear into which was fitted an eight-foot shaft. These cost thirteen pence and each person joining the United Irishmen was expected to have one made for himself. (Corrigan 1998).

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