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THE MINCHES OF ATHY, COUNTY KILDARE:

**A CATHOLIC MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY IN
THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

by

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Abbreviations

Short titles other than those listed below have been used in the notes. In such cases the full title and date of publication are given in the first citation

E.H.R.	<i>Economic history review</i>
G.O.	Genealogical Office
J.K.A.S.	<i>Journal of the Kildare archaeological society</i>
N.A.	National Archives
N.H.I.	A New History of Ireland
N.L.	National library of Ireland
r.c.	Roman Catholic
R.D.	Registry of Deeds
T.A.B.	Tithe applotment books
V.O.	Valuation Office

INTRODUCTION

One of the recurring themes in the history and literature of Ireland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been the decline of the landlord class. Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century this group, although not quite in the ascendant, was still referred to as the ascendancy or landed establishment. Their position justified such descriptions. They still had a monopoly of wealth, status and power in Ireland. Their wealth was enormous in terms of land. Twenty years after the famine two-thirds of the country's land surface was owned by about 2000 people and less than 800 people possessed half of that land.¹ In spite of electoral reform in 1850 which greatly expanded the parliamentary franchise, landed families still accounted for almost seventy-five per cent of Irish M.P.s in 1868.² The 1870s began a period of decline for the ascendancy so that by the end of the century much of their power and influence has been lost to members of the catholic middle class.

This decline has been the subject of detailed examination but the concurrent rise to power of the catholic middle class has not received the same attention. Who were the people who replaced the landlord class and where did they come from? In order to examine these questions, one particular family, the Minchs of south county Kildare will be looked at. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Minchs were tenant farmers who occupied forty-four acres near Ballitore in county Kildare (see map 1). One member of this family went to Athy in the 1840s and established a business there through which he acquired considerable wealth. Like other entrants into the catholic middle class, he became involved in local politics as a member of the Town Commission of Athy. His son's involvement in politics was more extensive. He was a

member of the town commission, the Board of Guardians of Athy Union and in 1892 was elected M.P. for south Kildare. By the end of the nineteenth century the Minchs were one of the wealthiest and most influential families in county Kildare.

No previous study of this family has been published. Indeed family histories in the Irish context tend to deal with the Anglo-Irish gentry or old Gaelic aristocracy. They usually consist of genealogical lists, descriptions of big houses and maybe a few interesting facts or legends about particular individuals. This study is based on a different type of family and will take a different approach. The genealogical background will be presented not as an end in itself, but as an aid to understanding the world in which the Minch family lived. Then the communities to which they belonged as farmers, businessmen and politicians will be examined in turn to provide the context for their activities in each of these spheres.

Sources

For those families below the landowning class it is necessary to use fragments of information from a variety of sources to construct genealogies. These include headstone inscriptions, church registers, the civil registration of births, marriages and deaths, and early twentieth century census returns. Information regarding land holdings in the nineteenth century is available in the tithe applotment survey and Griffiths valuation. The valuation office records which contain details of changes of occupation subsequent to the publication of Griffith's valuation is useful in the context not only of land holdings but also of town property. The records of leases and mortgages held in the registry of deeds provides additional details of the way in which

the Minchs acquired property in Athy. This is an important source for the expansion of their business because, unfortunately, the records of that business do not survive.

Nineteenth century directories providing commercial listings for Athy help to provide an insight into the business environment of the town.

In the political sphere, the minute books of Athy Town Commission prior to 1891 do not survive, nor do these of Athy board of guardians prior to 1914. To make up this deficiency newspapers reports have been used. There were no newspapers published in county Kildare until relatively late in the nineteenth century but *The Leinster Express* published in Maryborough (now Portlaoise) from 1831, carried reports from the Athy area as did *The Leinster Leader* which began publication in Naas in 1880.

The first chapter begins with some family background. This is followed by a description of the Minch farm and the other farms in the neighbouring community, both before and after the famine. Post famine living conditions and changes in the family structure are then examined. This is followed by a look at the marriages and the resulting kinship networks of the Minch family. Chapter two deals with the town of Athy and the establishment of the Minch family business. Matthew Minch's activities enabled to develop a network of contacts among the business community in Athy. It also allowed him to ascend the social ladder and he became involved in local politics. Chapter three deals with his membership of Athy Town Commission and also with the political career of his son. The land war provides the background to the emergence of the younger Minch on the local political scene. The experience he gained during this

period and his membership of local elected bodies made Mathew J. Minch a very influential member of the local community.

NOTE: The name Matthew occurs in all three generations of the Minch family covered in this study. Where the context does not clearly differentiate between them, the suffixes snr. or jnr. are used. In the final chapter an added complication arises because there were two Mathew Minchs on the town commission at the same time. In keeping with the convention used in contemporary records, the younger man will be identified by the use of his middle initial. Thus he is called Mathew J. Minch while his father is referred as Mathew Minch.

Chapter 1. The Minch Family of Portersize

Family Background

The surname Minch is associated almost exclusively with County Kildare.¹ One of the authorities on the derivation of Irish surnames put forward two possible origins for Minch. Either it was an abbreviation of Minchin or it was an anglicization of Mac Naois. However he then rejects both of these theories and admits to having no alternative suggestion to offer.² Another possibility is that the name has a Scottish derivation. The stretch of water between the north west coast of Scotland and the Western Isles is called north Minch, while little Minch is between the island of Skye and the Western Isles.³

In any case there was a catholic family named Minch in county Kildare from at least the mid eightieth century when Patrick Minch was among the 'popish inhabitants' of the parish of Kilrush in 1766.⁴ (see appendix 1 for Minch genealogy) The family continued in Kilrush (see map 1) into the first decades of the nineteenth century when the registers for the catholic parish of Suncroft record the baptisms of the four children of Thomas and Honora Minch between 1805 and 1813.⁵ Thomas and Honora were buried in Kilrush cemetery in 1824 and 1840 respectively. The headstone was erected by their son Matthew Minch of the City Quay, Dublin.⁶ He occupied a premises at 40, City Quay from 1863 until his death in 1886. He was a provision dealer and ferry boat overseer⁷ and his estate was valued at £7,220.14.5.⁸

There is no record of any Minch occupying land in Kilrush in either the tithe applotment survey (1823) or Griffiths valuation (1852) undertaken in the first part of the nineteenth century.⁹ However, a few miles to the south, in Timolin, there is evidence of other Minch families. The Castledermot catholic parish registers reveal that Patrick Minch and his wife Anne (or Hanna) nee Neil of Timolin had a son baptized in 1807.¹⁰ This child obviously survived for only a short time because the following year another son was given the same name 'John'.¹¹ In 1810 the probate court of the diocese of Dublin, issued letters of administration for the estate of Patrick Minch publican, of Timolin.¹² A contemporary travellers' guide advised that the village of Timolin had 'little to recommend it except its situation, a neat church upon a rising ground and an inn.'¹³ It is possible that the inn referred to was the premises occupied by Patrick Minch, publican.

Portersize, Timolin

In the townland of Portersize, also in Timolin parish, Matthew Minch occupied a farm of 71 acres.¹⁴ Matthew Minch was born in 1774¹⁵ and his wife Anna nee Whelan¹⁶ was twenty four years his junior.¹⁷ In about 1820¹⁸ two sons, Michael and Matthew, were born. Anna was then about twenty two years of age and so their marriage probably took place in 1818 or 1819. It is not possible to ascertain whether the boys were twins or not. The year of birth has been calculated by subtracting their ages from years of death on the headstone. Since both men were in their seventies when they died, their ages at death are not necessarily reliable. In any case it appears that Michael was the older of the two.¹⁹ In 1827 a third son, George, was born²⁰ followed by Patrick in 1829.²¹ The only evidence of daughters in this family is of

those who did not survive to adulthood and were therefore buried in the family plot. Rose and Ellen died young²² and Rosanna, born in 1832, died at fourteen years of age.²³ Various other female Minchs appear in the Narraghmore parish registers in the 1830s and 1850s (a considerable part of the registers for the 1840s do not survive). They are recorded as either mother's or godmother's of children on the baptism registers, but without other evidence it is not possible to determine their relationship to the Mint family in Portersize.²⁴

The circumstances of the family of Matthew and Anna Minch can be ascertained by looking at the farm at Porterize in the context of the area in which it was located. The Minch family occupied a farm in the townland of Portersize since at least the early nineteenth century.²⁵ Portersize is in the civil parish of Timolin, in the barony of Narragh and Reban east. This area of south-east County Kildare is in the foothills of the Wicklow mountains to the east, and is therefore more hilly than the plain to the north and west. The river Griese, a tributary of the Barrow, runs through Timolin and the mail coach road from Dublin to Carlow also divided the parish. The nearest towns were Castledermot (4 miles), Athy, (6.5 miles) and Kilcullen (8.5 miles).

The parish also included Ballitore, a village founded in the early eighteenth century by members of the society of friends.²⁶ The 'elegant simplicity of the buildings, orchards, and gardens' was attributed to this quaker influence and the meadows and fields were 'highly improved and in full cultivation'.²⁷ In 1837 Ballitore boasted a dispensary, savings bank, two schools and a station for the constabulary police force. There were three fairs held there annually with two others in Timolin.²⁸

One of these, held on Easter Monday every year, was noted in the eighteenth century for faction fights between the O'Byrne's and Timmon's factions.²⁹

As a largely rural parish, agriculture was an important activity in Timolin. In 1827 the parish was surveyed under the provisions of the Tithe Acts.³⁰ The land was measured in Irish plantation acres and each of the sixty-six holdings were divided according to usage. The categories were tillage, meadow, pasture, bog and waste ground, rivers, roads and plantation. The breakdown of land use in the parish was : tillage 37%, meadow 22%: pasture 37% with the balance of 4% in bog roads etc. (see table 1a) Thus roughly one third of the land was devoted to tillage and almost two thirds to animal husbandry. The breakdown differed between large and small farms. There were eighteen farms of over thirty acres and only five of these had more than half of their land devoted to tillage. (see table 1b) The majority of large farms were predominantly involved in rearing and or fattening animals. In contrast there were nineteen holdings of less than five acres, only four of which had most of their land in meadow and pasture. Fifty four per cent of the land was devoted to tillage, which was the predominant usage of land on almost eighty per cent of small farms (see table 1c). It seems likely that the dominant position of tillage on small farms reflects the subsistence economy whereby small holders consumed almost all of the food they produced. The larger farmers, in contrast, were in a position to produce a surplus to be sold and could thus acquire the capital necessary for investment in animals.

In 1837 the land in the parish of Timolin was described as being chiefly under tillage.³¹ This seems to be a change from the 1827 position when only just over one

third of the land was in tillage (see table 1a). However, even in 1827, over two thirds of farms (as distinct from land) were devoted chiefly to tillage. Lime from a local quarry was burnt for fertilizer in 1837 and the land was ‘in general good with little waste.’³² Much of the grain grown in the early years of the century in this area was ‘bought up by commission and by flour mills, and sent by water carriage to Dublin.’³³ The town of Athy about six miles from Timolin, was one of the principal markets for grain in County Kildare and the Grand Canal provided transport to Dublin.³⁴ Thirty years later this tendency continued, wheat, barley, oats and potatoes not for on farm consumption were sold for the Dublin market.³⁵

Table 1 Land use in Timolin parish 1827.

1a): Total land (66 holdings)

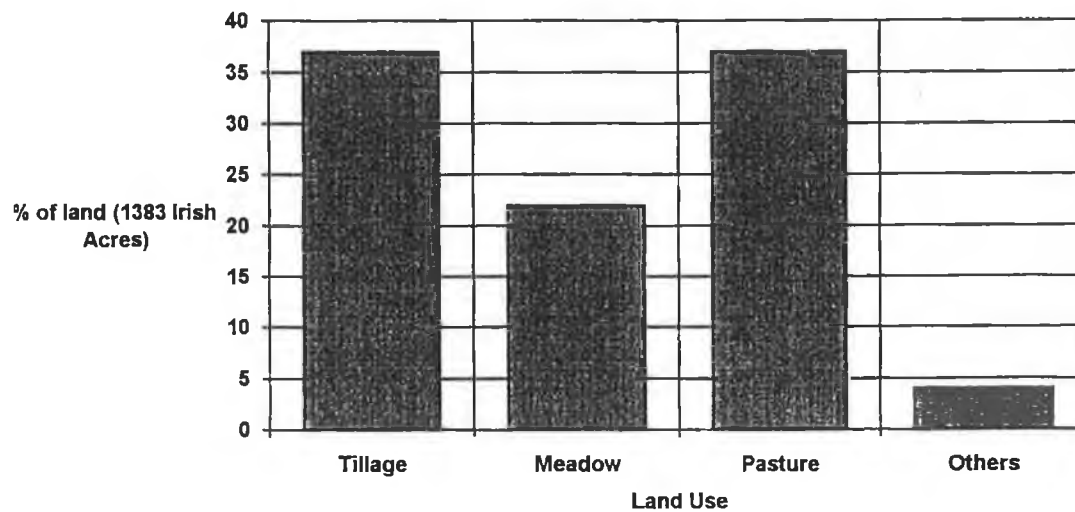


Table 1. b) Farms over 30 acres (18 holdings)

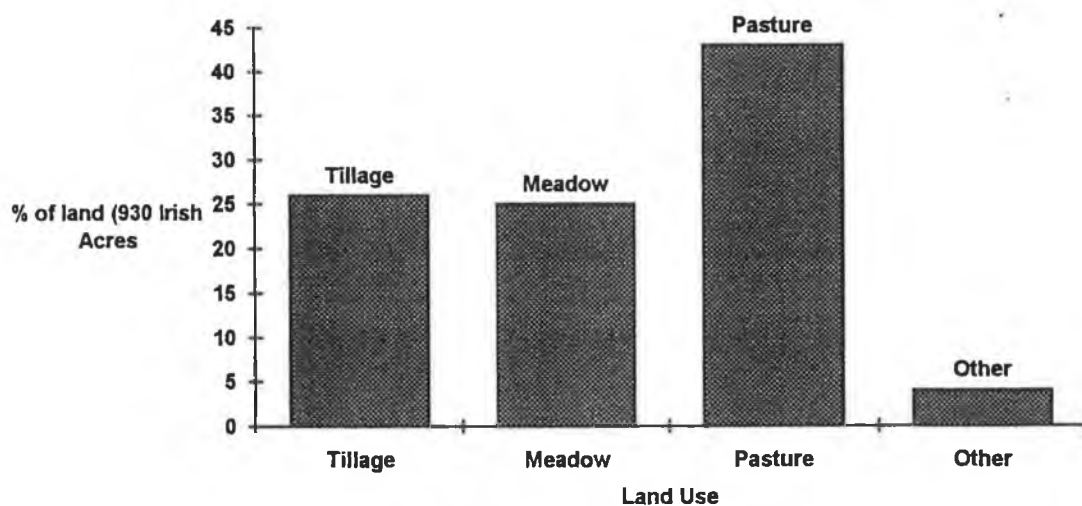
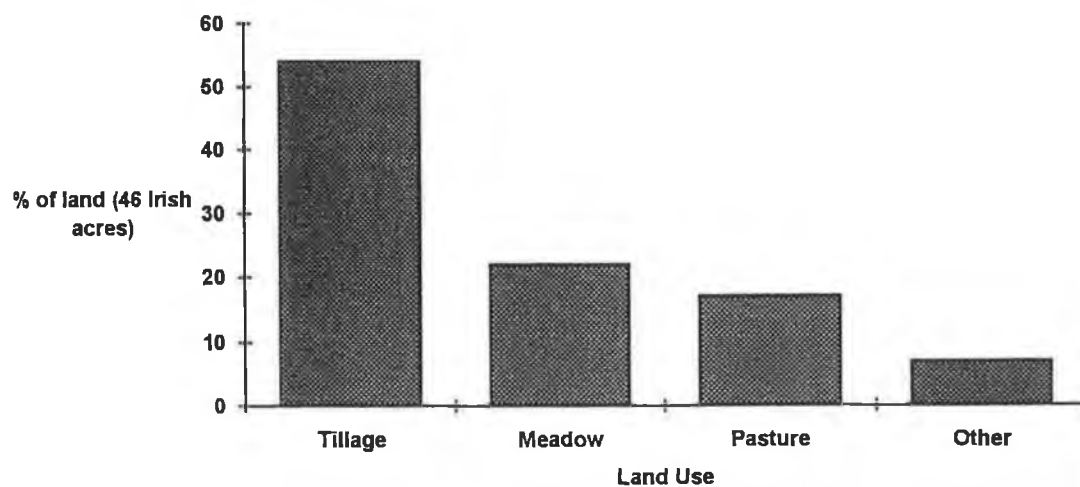


Table 1. c) Farms under 5 acres (19 holdings)



Source: Tithe applotment survey, County Kildare, Barony Narragh and Reban East, Timolin Parish, 1827, pp35-43

In 1827 according to the tithe survey, Matthew Minch farmed almost forty-four Irish acres on the estate of George Drake³⁶ which included all of the townlands of Portersize and Timolin. The Drake family did not live on their Kildare estate, their residence was at New Ross, Co. Wexford.³⁷ The Minch holding was the third largest holding in Portersize and seventh largest in the whole parish. The land use on this farm reflected that of other large farms in the parish, in that one third was in tillage and twice that amount in pasture. There was no meadow land on the Minch farm, thus hay for the winter feeding of animals was not produced in 1827. This farm also had 300 trees planted in 1813 by Matthew Minch and registered under a scheme to encourage the planting of trees.³⁸ Registration with the clerk of the peace within a year of planting meant that the trees became the property of the tenant. In 1807, a commentator on agriculture in County Kildare noted that, the 'acts for the encouragement of planting either have failed from the natural slothfulness of the farmers, or, from some other latent cause'.³⁹ The quaker example in Timolin may have influenced other farmers to undertake tree planting in this area. Between 1795 and 1812 the planting of 6,200 trees was registered in the parish. The neighbouring parish of Tankardstown, in contrast, which was almost four times as large as Timolin, only registered 2,200 trees over the same period.⁴⁰

Together with his farming activities Matthew Minch was also involved in local administrative affairs. Although a catholic, he was one of the fourteen members of a special vestry of the parish called together to elect a new commissioner for the assessment of tithes, to replace a recently deceased commissioner, in 1828.⁴¹ The

average holding of the members of the special vestry (whose holdings could be ascertained) was fifty-four Irish acres. Although there were a number of quaker landholders with large farms, there were no quaker names on the list of vestry members. This indicates a continuation of the traditional quaker refusal to pay tithes to the established church.⁴²

It seems that only the two largest tenants in the townland of Portersize had leases registered in the early nineteenth century. Although these do not include the Minch holding (which was the third largest) they reveal something about the level of rents on the Drake estate. In 1823 George Drake granted a lease of ninety-seven Irish acres to William Wilson for three lives or thirty one years at a yearly rent of one hundred pounds.⁴³ This worked out at slightly over one pound per acre. In 1843 this lease was surrendered and a new lease with virtually the same conditions was granted to Stephen Wilson for the remaining thirteen years of the original lease.⁴⁴ This was presumably due to the death of William Wilson.

The second farm was leased to Patrick and James Whelan in 1838. It comprised seventy-one Irish acres and the lease was for three lives or thirty-one years at an annual rent of £94.14.0 or £1.2.08 per acre.⁴⁵ Ten years later this farm was sublet to William Walshe at the higher rent of £2 per acre. The valuation of the townland under the tithe acts⁴⁶ reveals that the first farm of 97 acres was worth slightly less than one pound per acre which is similar to the rent charged in 1823 and 1843. The second farm of 71 acres was valued in 1827 at almost two pounds per acre.⁴⁷ In

this case the landlord seems to have undervalued the farm by a considerable amount in 1838. In 1848 the intermediate lessor was able to achieve the full value of this farm. Matthew Minch's holding was valued at £57 or £1.60 per acre in 1827.⁴⁸ In the absence of a lease it is not possible to know how close his rent came to this valuation. The example of the Whelan/Walshe farm would suggest that rents tended towards the valuation rate.

After the famine the number of farms in Portersize had been reduced from nine to eight due to the amalgamation of the two smallest holdings.⁴⁹ Half of the farms seem to have stayed in the same families. This stability was more apparent in the larger farms. The census of 1851 however reveals a reduction in population in this townland from ninety to forty-two over the proceeding decade while the number of inhabited houses fell from twelve to eight⁵⁰. Thus even in this relatively prosperous and stable townland, the famine years led to a considerable dislocation in the social structure.

In the immediate post famine period, there was a strong correlation between farm size and building valuation. The two largest farms were non residential i.e they were described as 'offices and land' but even in these cases the offices or farm buildings had a higher valuation than the buildings on the smaller, residential farms. There were five holdings with houses on them, together with two houses to which no land was attached and also one parcel of land with no buildings. The buildings on the Minch farm had the highest valuation of the residential farms.⁵¹

Family Circumstances

The economic situation of the Minch family in the mid nineteenth century has been examined by looking at their holdings in the context of the neighbouring farms. In order to get a better understanding of how the family lived it is necessary to look at their immediate surroundings i.e. housing conditions. Changes in the family structure are also important because they had major implications for the day to day lives of family members.

The composition of the Minch family of Portersize changed over the course of the famine. In 1846 two deaths took place, that of Matthew senior in March at the age of seventy-two, and that of his fourteen year old daughter, Rosanna, in September.⁵² Although he was an elderly man, the death of the head of the household obviously led to a restructuring of the family. No probate was taken out on the estate of Matthew Minch.⁵³ Although he was the occupier of a substantial farm, Matthew did not have a lease therefore he had no interest in the land to leave to his heirs. Instead the son became a new yearly tenant in place of his father. In this case it was Michael Minch who took over the farm.⁵⁴ He was twenty-six at the time of his fathers death. The rest of the household comprised of the widow Anna (aged fifty-six), and her three other sons, Matthew (twenty-six), George (nineteen) and Patrick (seventeen).

There is no contemporary description of the house occupied by this family in the mid-nineteenth century. For a detailed description it is necessary to look at the

1901 census return. Although this refers to conditions fifty years later, the valuation records for the intervening period show no increase in the valuation of buildings on this holding.⁵⁵ Assuming therefore that no substantial additions or alterations were made the 1901 description gives an idea of living conditions in the second half of the nineteenth century. The walls of the dwelling house were made of non-perishable materials (i.e. stone, brick, and concrete) as was the roof (slate, iron or tiles). There were four room in the house and it had three windows at the front.⁵⁶ This implies that it was a single storied house, one room deep. This is consistent with the type of farmhouse described as common in county Kildare in 1837, 'long buildings of one story, containing in the centre a large kitchen with lodging rooms at each end; the front door opens into a yard.... on the sides of which are the outbuildings'⁵⁷. In 1901 there were four outbuildings described as a stable, cowhouse, piggery and fowlhouse. The dwelling house fell into the second class of house according to the census classification which described such buildings as 'comfortable farmhouses'⁵⁸. By the standards of the time, the Minch family occupied a relatively comfortable house, which was certainly better than the houses of the majority of farmers even in Co. Kildare. As has been seen above, the buildings on the Minch farm had the highest valuation of any of the residential farms in the townland of Portersize.

Although the farm could support one family in relative comfort it could not provide a living for all four brothers indefinitely. In order to gain independence, the younger brothers required alternative livelihoods. Though little is known of the educational experience of this generation of the Minch family, it seems unlikely that it would have been sufficient for them to aspire to entry into any of the professions. The

ability to provide a certain amount of capital was a pre-requisite for acquiring another farm or engaging in trade or business in one of the surrounding towns. Emigration also required some capital but does not seem to have been a desired option in this particular family. Because of these capital requirements it seems that decisions about the future of the younger brothers must have been taken by the family rather than by the individuals themselves. It is unlikely that any one of them, unsupported by the family, could have had the capital they needed. The timing of each brother leaving the family home also suggests that a waiting period was required to accumulate resources for each subsequent move.

Matthew was the first one to leave home. In about 1848⁵⁹, two years after his father's death, he set up business in Athy as a corn merchant. The original premises from which he operated may have been at Canal Side. By 1852⁶⁰ this was his address and it remained the centre of the business well into the twentieth century. The building at canal side was described in 1851 as a house and in 1858 (by which time Matthew was the rated occupier),⁶¹ as 'office and corn store' (A more detailed description of Matthew's activity in Athy follows in chapter two). Some time prior to 1858,⁶² Matthew also became the occupier of a premises at Duke St, Athy. It appears that it was in fact his youngest brother Patrick who actually traded here as a grocer.⁶³ This implies that Matthew, who was by then established in Athy, had some part in his brothers move to the town.

Duke Street was the principal street in Athy. Patrick's grocer shop together with the living accommodation had a valuation of twenty-five pounds.⁶⁴ This was a

substantial building. Only three other premises in the town excluding public buildings, had a higher valuation.(see table 2). Five years after the Minchs took over the premises, Patrick died, aged thirty-four. Although he left no will, his brother Matthew was granted letters of administration of the estate which was valued at under £600.⁶⁵

Table 2: Fifteen buildings in Athy with the highest valuation, 1852.

<u>Description</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Valuation (£)</u>
Gaol	Ophally Street	69.00
Church	Ophally Street	50.00
Market house and Court House	Emily Square	50.00
Chapel	Stanhope Street	43.00
Military Barracks	Barracks Lane	36.00
Corn Mill	Duke Street	32.00
House and offices	Duke Street	30.00
House and offices	Duke Street	28.00
Bank	Leinster Street	28.00
House and offices	Leinster Street	26.00
House and offices	Duke Street	25.00 *
House and offices	Duke Street	25.00
House and offices	Ophally Street	25.00
House and offices	Emily Street	25.00
House and offices	Tanyand Lane	25.00

* Premises occupied by Patrick Minch, 1858 - 63.

Source; Griffiths Valuation, Union of Athy pp 8 - 37.

By about 1860 therefore, three of the four Minch brothers had acquired the means of economic independence. Michael on the farm at Portersize, Matthew in the corn trade and Patrick as a retail grocer. The fourth brother, George, remained on the farm at Portersize until 1874. In November of that year he too acquired a farm near Monasterevin.⁶⁶ The former occupier of this farm of 103 acres had been adjudged a bankrupt and the creditors transferred his interest in the farm to George Minch on payment of £100. The land was held on a yearly tenancy from the duke of Leinster at a rent of fifty four pounds per annum. The valuation on the land was forty-six pounds, while that on the buildings was four pounds and five shillings.⁶⁷ The house was a more substantial one than that at Portersize (which had a valuation of one pound and fifteen shillings). It was a two storied building with six rooms and had five windows at the front. The 1901 description also includes a stable, piggery, barn and fowlhouse.⁶⁸ A later photograph shows the house and yard as described in 1901 with the addition of a porch at the front, built between 1901 and 1911.⁶⁹ (see illustration 2)

Thirty years after the death of Matthew Minch senior, his four sons had established independent livelihoods. From a base of a seventy acre farm, together with whatever capital the father may have accumulated at the time of his death, his sons had also acquired another, larger farm and two business in Athy.

Marriages and Kinship

Having looked at the Minch family and their immediate physical surroundings, it is proposed to examine some of the broader personal networks to which this family belonged. Informal ties based on friendship and mutual interest in the local community can only be assumed in the absence of evidence for such relationships. However the more formal networks established as a result of marriages can be looked at using parochial and state registration of marriage in the nineteenth century.

Contemporary accounts of pre famine Ireland, noted the prevalence of early marriages among the rural poor.⁷⁰ However it is also clear that a system of carefully arranged marriages among the more prosperous section of the rural society was well established before the famine. For this class of strong farmers, marriage was an important event not merely for the individuals concerned but for their families. A marriage led to the formation of a new family and involved a new set of extended kin. This brought both benefits and obligations including the redistribution of assets within and between families. Marriage practices also had wider implications because of the importance of the family in both social and economic life in rural society. Most men and women did not achieve full status in these close knit communities until they were married⁷¹.

Among the class of larger tenants farmers the main characteristics of the system of arranged marriages were: 1) that farmers married at a later age than others in less favourable circumstances, 2) that both men and women were restricted in their choice of partner to members of their own social class and, 3) that families had a large

influence over the timing and the choice of partners. While the harshness of such a system on individuals is apparent it is also obvious that it could not have operated for any length of time against the wishes of the couples concerned. Both parents and children were products of the same culture and seem to have accepted the same set of priorities with regard to marriage. The interests of the family as a whole would seem to have taken precedence over individual preferences.

It has been asserted by K.H. Connell that this system as it operated on a wider scale in post famine rural Ireland meant that marriages were contemplated not when a man needed a wife but when the land needed a woman.⁷² In other words the timing of marriage depended largely on the parents. When the parents could no longer run the farm either through old age or death, the son took over. It was only then, when he gained economic independence, that he could contemplate marriage. The Minch family seem to have adhered to this system throughout the nineteenth century.

Matthew Minch senior was in his forties when he married, and his wife was twenty years his junior. This marriage took place in about 1818.⁷³ Since there is no record of the death of his father, it is only possible to assert that this marriage was delayed, the reason for the delay is not clear. In the next generation however, the timing is more obvious. Michael Minch, who took over the farm when his father died in 1848, was then aged twenty-six. His mother survived for another twenty years and Michael remained single throughout her lifetime. Thus in spite of the fact that he was the rated occupier of the farm, his marriage was delayed until after his mother's death. Two years later Michael, who was nearly fifty years old married Sarah Murphy who

was twenty three years his junior.⁷⁴ Sarah's father Michael Murphy had a farm of twenty seven acres at Lipstown, Narraghmore about five miles from Portersize.⁷⁵

This farm was considerably smaller than the Minch farm. However it seems that Sarah may have been an only child. In 1891 the Murphy farm passed to a tenant of another name⁷⁶ and Sarah's mother subsequently lived with her daughter at Portersize.⁷⁷

The witness at the marriage of Micheal Minch and Sarah Murphy, were John Whelan, Colbinstown and Anna Morrin, Newbridge. Morrin was the maiden name of Sarah's mother.⁷⁸ Michael and Sarah had only one child, a son named Matthew Lawrence, born in 1871. The sponsors at his baptism were his paternal uncle George Minch (who was still living at Portersize), and his maternal grandmother Julia Murphy⁷⁹ (who subsequently lived in the same house). The choice of godparents in this case reinforced family and kinship ties.

George Minch lived with Michael and his family until 1874, when he acquired the farm know as Shamrock, at Ballygreany near Monasterevin.(see above p.18) In the deed of conveyance he was described as a farmer so he must have assisted Michael on the home farm up till then. Six years after aquiring his own land, George married at the age of fifty-three. The time lag in this case was probably to enable him to establish himself on the new farm. His wife was Bridget O'Toole from Kilrush which was associated with the Minch family earlier in the nineteenth century.(see above p. 5) Although the relationship between the Minchs of Kilrush and the Portersize family are not certain, the family connection with Kilrush probably had some significance in at least establishing contact between George and Brigid. The witnesses to the marriage were Michael Murphy and Catherine Neil.⁸⁰ The O'Toole (or Toole) family

occupied a total of 287 statute acres in two townlands at Kilrush. Brigid's father John had the largest farm of 158 acres.⁸¹ George and Brigid Minch had two sons and three daughters details of whose baptisms are shown in table 3.

Table 3. Baptisms of the family of George and Brigid Minch, 1882 - 1890

Date of Baptism	Name	Sponsor	Sponsor
23.2.1882	Maryanne	Peter Broughal	Mary Toole
1.4.1883	Mathew Lawrence	Mathew Minch	Brigid Neil
26.10.1884	Mary Anne	James Toole	Mary toole
8.5.1887	Brigid Margaret	Christopher Brohal	Catherine Brohal
5.1.1890	Michael Joseph	Peter Kenna	Alice Kenna

Source: Monasterevin r.c. parish registers, 1819 - 1899

(Kildare Heritage Project, County Library, Newbridge)

Out of the ten sponsors, four had the same surnames as the parents of the children i.e. Minch or Toole. (The use of their married name by women means that some of the other female sponsors may have been family members also). The surname Broughal (or Brohal) occurs three times which may signify another family connection. It is worthy of note that one of these children later married someone called Broughal in 1938.⁸² Two of the sponsors bore the surname Kenna and there was one called Neil. Another female Neil had acted as witness to the marriage of George and Brigid Minch. Thus even where the exact relationships are not clear, it seems that the choice of godparents reinforced family ties. It also implies continuing contacts between the brothers and their families.

Both of the Minch brothers who remained in agriculture followed the practice of their father by marrying late to women of similar backgrounds, who were much younger than themselves. This is in spite of the fact that these men were no longer dependent on their parents at the time of marriage. The influence of their family on their choice of partners is difficult to discern. However the subsequent living arrangements and choice of sponsors at the baptisms of their children, point to continuing close family ties.

Did these characteristics of the arranged marriage system apply also to those who were of the same farming background but moved from rural society to take up careers in business? It is not possible to generalise from the example of one family but it is worth contrasting the rural experience in this family with that of the town dwellers. Unfortunately there is only one instance to look at, because Patrick Minch, the grocer in Duke St., died unmarried at the age of thirty four. Mathew on the other hand married in 1852, about four years after he began to trade as a corn merchant in Athy. He was by then thirty-two, which was considerably younger than the age at which his two brothers married. His wife was Catherine Brennan, then aged nineteen, the daughter of Murtagh Brennan of Duke Street. Brennan occupied two buildings on this, the main street of Athy, in 1852. Both of these buildings had a valuation of thirteen pounds and ten shillings.⁸⁴

The witnesses at the marriages of Mathew Minch and Catherine Brennan were James Comins and Eliza Peppard.⁸⁵ Comins was the surname of Matthew's landlord of the premises at Canal Side.⁸⁶ The Peppard name was well known in Athy. The shop in Duke St. subsequently occupied by Patrick Minch, was at the time of this marriage occupied by John Peppard,⁸⁷ while Thomas Peppard was later to serve on the Athy Town Commission in the 1860s.⁸⁸ Mathew and Catherine Minch had two children. In 1853 a daughter, Anna Maria was born. Her godparents were her father's brother Michael Minch and a Catherine Timmons. The following year the sponsors at the baptism of a son called Mathew were the same two people who acted as witnesses at the parents marriage.⁸⁹

Thus it appears that Mathew displayed more independence than his brothers when it came to marriage. He was almost twenty years younger than either Michael or George when he married, and although his bride was considerably younger than himself the age gap was not as large as that between his brothers and their wives. Although the family link was maintained in the choice of his brother Michael as godfather for Anna Maria, it seems that Mathew was more concerned with establishing new ties with the business community in Athy. His wife was from this background rather than from the farming class and the connections with the Comins and Peppard families continued as business grew. The next chapter will take a closer look at his life in Athy and at Mathew Minch's role in business in the town.

Chapter II Matthew Minch; Business Activity in Athy

Athy: History and Development

Athy is situated near a ford over the river Barrow on the south western borders of County Kildare.¹ (see map 1) It is in a corridor of flat land between the bogs to the west and the Wicklow mountains to the east. The major routes connecting Dublin with the south east of the country ran through this plain and thus the site commanding the ford has always been of strategic importance. The ford was fortified by the early Norman settlers who also founded two monasteries of the Crouched Friars and the Dominicans on either bank of the river.² Subject to frequent assault by the neighboring O'Moores and O'Kellys³, the town was further fortified because its defence was of major importance to the government.

The manors of Athy and Woodstock passed, through marriage, to the Fitzgeralds who had the title earl of Kildare from 1316.⁴ The presence of the Fitzgeralds, and their importance in the government of Ireland, ensured that the town acquired administrative functions. The corporation of Athy was established by a charter in 1613 and the borough sent two members to the Irish parliament until the act of union in 1800.⁵ A court of record was held for pleas arising within the borough and a curl count for the recovery of small debts. The summer assizes for the county were held in Athy, and the quarter sessions alternated between here and Naas.⁵

The land surrounding Athy is fertile and well drained. The light to medium textured soil is ideally suited to tillage crops, particularly barley.⁶ Being part of the estate of the dukes of Leinster (formerly earls of Kildare), this area had the benefit of continuous ownership over a long period.⁷ This stability and the fertility of the soil resulted in the area's reputation as the main tillage region of county Kildare. Improving landlords and gentleman farmers introduced innovations in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries which produced 'beneficial effects among the small farmers.'⁸ In 1782 the duke of Leinster encouraged the formation of a farming society. One of its founders was T.J. Rawson, agricultural inspector for the county.⁹ The Dublin Society, founded in the attempt to support improvements in agriculture and industry in Ireland, was at this time publishing a series of county surveys,¹⁰ and Rawson was the author of the Kildare volume. This statistical survey published in 1807 included his own 'observations on the means of improvement', particularly in agriculture.¹¹ Rawson was himself a farmer at Cardenton, Athy and was responsible for various agricultural improvements in the locality.¹²

The progress which resulted from these and similar innovations contributed to Athy's growth as a market centre. At the same time other developments were taking place. In 1791 the Grand Canal had reached the Barrow at Athy¹³ thus opening the waterway from Dublin to Carlow, New Ross and Waterford via the Barrow navigation. Considerable quantities of corn, ground at the local mills and turf from the surrounding bogs could be thus transported easily to Dublin and to the south east.¹⁴ Athy in the early nineteenth century was therefore well situated for inland trade. The ease of communication and the availability of a plentiful supply of water and fuel meant

that it was a good location for agriculturally based industry. Milling, brewing, tanning, cloth manufacture and brick making all took place in the town and its environs.¹⁵

The dukes of Leinster had a large influence on the physical fabric of Athy. This influence is still reflected in the names of its streets such as Duke Street, Leinster Street and Ophally Street. The market house (now known as the town hall) dominates Emily Square which was named for a duchess of Leinster. The building was commissioned by the then earl of Kildare in the 1740s to house the market, held every Tuesday and Saturday. The upper floor of the building served as a courthouse.¹⁶ (see illustration 3) Another building in the centre of Athy with Fitzgerald connections is White's Castle, a fifteenth century tower erected to defend the bridge over the Barrow. It served as a garrison for troops until 1710, a jail until 1830 and subsequently as a police barracks.¹⁷ The jail which opened in 1830 was erected on a site provided by the duke of Leinster who also paid one third of the construction cost.¹⁸

The Fitzgerald influence also pervaded other aspects of life in Athy. In the late eighteenth century the People's Park was laid out by the first duke and planted with many species of imported trees.¹⁹ St. Michael's church of Ireland church was built in 1840 on land donated by the then duke. A site was also given to the roman catholic parish together with a contribution to help in the building of a chapel. An adjoining site was provided for a catholic school together with 'a convenient residence for the parish priest at a nominal rent'. The town also had places for worship for calvinists and methodists.²⁰

The Famine in Athy

The evidence presented so far paints a picture of Athy as a busy, prosperous town with a fertile hinterland, whose landlord was a major benefactor to various public institutions. This must be balanced by the contemporary references to poverty and misery in the town in the immediate pre famine period. A correspondent to a local journal in 1838, for example noted that 'during the late and present inclement season..... sickness and starvation visited alike the able bodied and aged poor.' The writer also referred to able bodied labourers at the corners, hoards of beggars at the doors and disease and famine in the hovels of the poor.'²¹ These hovels of the poor probably coincide with those classified as fourth class houses in the census of 1841. They consisted of mud cabins having only one room and were regarded as unfit for human habitation.²² Over eighteen per cent of the 790 houses in Athy fell into this category in 1841.²³

The level of poverty in many towns in Ireland was increased by an influx of unemployed labourers from the surrounding areas hoping for work in the town. Beggars were also a feature of most towns. It was to deal with such problems of poverty and distress that the poor relief act of 1838²⁴ was introduced. The country was divided into units called poor law unions, each centred on a town from which it took its name. A workhouse was built in each of these towns to cater for the poor in the union.²⁵ Athy was chosen as the centre of the union which covered the southern part of County Kildare together with a portion of Queen's County. The population of

Athy poor law union was 47,912. The workhouse was built in 1843 on a site outside the town and had accommodation for 360 adults and 240 children.²⁶

The poor law system was barely established when blight first struck the potato crop on which a majority of the population depended, in 1845. Distress in the south Kildare area over the subsequent famine period can be gauged from the increases in the number of inmates in the Athy workhouse. The pressure on accommodation necessitated the opening of two auxiliary workhouses and the peak occupancy was 1528 inmates in June of 1849.²⁷ The number who attended at government soup kitchens in Athy union during 1847 amounted to thirty four per cent of the (1841) population.²⁸ This was a higher proportion than in either of the other unions in the county - Naas (twenty five per cent) or Celbridge (sixteen per cent). These figures point to a rising level of distress from the north to the south of the county. The financial situation of the three unions displayed a similar trend. Athy union was in serious difficulties according to figures published in 1848, while the position in Celbridge was relatively easy, with Naas somewhere between the two.²⁹ The distress in Athy union was typical of tillage farming areas which were in general more densely populated than pastoral areas and where a higher proportion of the population depended on the potato.³⁰

Population decline between 1841 and 1851 also gives an indication of the effects of the famine on different areas. The decline for Ireland as a whole was approximately twenty per cent, while that for county Kildare was just over sixteen per cent.³¹ In Athy union the loss was higher than the national average at twenty-two per

cent. The town of Athy suffered a loss of 825 people which was sixteen per cent of the 1841 population.³²

Matthew Minch: Business activity

In spite of the upheaval caused by the famine, the town of Athy continued to expand as a market centre. The transport system was improved in 1846 with the opening of the Carlow branch of the Great Southern and Western railway line which passed through Athy.³³ The scarcity of food caused by the widespread failure of the potato crop, together with the government's reluctance to interfere with private interests in the domestic grain market resulted in high prices and increased profits for merchants. In October 1846 Deputy Commissary General Hewetson reported that 'the corn dealers and millers are everywhere making large profits.'³⁴ This was clearly an auspicious time for entry into the business. The town continued to benefit from this prosperity in the immediate post famine period so that by 1856 it was noted that 'a considerable traffic in corn exists, indeed, Athy is one of the best corn markets in Ireland.'³⁵ This was also reflected by the opening, in the same year, of the Corn Exchange in Emily Square.³⁶ This neo-Elizabethan building was another of the improvements of the dukes of Leinster.³⁷ A visitor who traveled around the country by train in the mid 1850's remarked that Athy was 'a handsome, regular town and for its size, a very prosperous and flourishing one'. He admired the courthouse (formerly the market house), dispensary, and the buildings of banks such as the Loan Fund, and the National Bank, both in Emily Square and also the Hibernian Banking Company which had taken over from failed Tipperary Joint Stock Banking Company.³⁸

It is not known when Mathew Minch first took up residence in Athy, although it is likely that he lived there for some time before he set up his business in about 1848 (see below). He did have relatives living in the town at this period and such a family connection may have provided an introduction for Mathew. James Minch was married in Athy in 1823³⁹ and was living in St. John's Lane in the early 1850s.⁴⁰ Patrick Minch married in 1834 and his youngest child was baptised in 1860.⁴¹ It seems that both of these men were sons of Thomas and Honora Minch of Kilrush⁴² and were thus related to Mathew Minch's family (see above chapter 1, and below appendix 1).

At the time of his marriage in 1852, Mathew Minch's address was given as 'Canal'.⁴³ Griffiths Valuation (published in 1852) does not record him in occupation of any tenement at the Canal or anywhere else in Athy.⁴⁴ However when the valuation records were first updated in 1858, he occupied a premises at 1, Canal Side described as 'offices and corn store' and valued at one pound and five shillings.⁴⁵

Another piece of evidence points to an earlier starting date for the Minch business. When the Irish Manuscripts Commission carried out a survey of business records in Co. Kildare in 1973, the surveyor who visited the firm of Minch Norton in Athy discovered that records 'extending back to 1848' had been burnt a few years previously.⁴⁶ In any case Minch's occupation of the premises at Canal Side began a relationship with the Comins family which was to continue for almost thirty years. The published valuation indicates that Patrick Comins was the occupier of numbers 2 and 3 Canal Side and the immediate lessor of fifteen out of the seventeen tenements at Canal Side. He was in the same position with regard to all ten houses on Tea lane (off Canal side) each valued at fifteen shillings.⁴⁷ Comins also occupied an office (store) and yard valued at ten pounds on William's Street⁴⁸ and was the lessor of two houses on the

same street, both valued at over five pounds.⁴⁹ He also occupied various parcels of land outside the town including eight acres at Bleach which bounded the Grand Canal.⁵⁰ The townland of Bleach was partially within the town of Athy and included Canal Side, Tea Lane and part of William Street.

Patrick Comins and his wife Mary (nee Moran) were married in 1841.⁵¹ They had eleven children all baptised between 1842 and 1857 in Athy. The catholic registers indicate that they lived along the canal. Their address was variously given as 'Canal', 'Canal West', 'Canal House' and 'Canal House Street'.⁵² Map 2 indicates Canal House overlooking the twenty seventh lock. Patrick Comins was listed as a corn merchant in Slater's Directory for 1846 and 1856.⁵³ Since Mathew Minch occupied the same premises from at least 1858 and was also a corn merchant, it seems that he took over the business of Patrick Comins. It is not unlikely that Minch worked for Comins before becoming a corn merchant in his own right. He continued to have a business relationship with Patrick Comins' widow in subsequent years (see below).

The destruction of the records of Minch Norton⁵⁴ makes it necessary to speculate about the nature of the business carried out by Mathew Minch as a corn merchant. Athy was one of the best corn markets in Ireland (see above p 26) and grain purchased by merchants there was transported via the canal to Dublin or Waterford. By 1864, the original corn store occupied by Mathew Minch at Canal Side was described as a malt store,⁵⁵ and in 1870 he was listed in Slater's Directory among the maltsers in Athy.⁵⁶ The firm of Minch Norton still carries out malting for Guinness' brewery at Canal Side in Athy.⁵⁷ It seems reasonable to assume therefore, that at least

part of the original business was the purchase of barley from local farmers and the sale to Dublin firms of malted grain. The practise of members of farming families moving into the malting business has been noted in Wexford in the late eighteenth century.⁵⁸ The tillage farming system in Wexford was similar to that in south Kildare⁵⁹ and Wexford town, like Athy, was in advantageous location as far as transporting grain and malt to Dublin was concerned. In the case of Wexford, maltsters acted as brokers between the local farmers and the Dublin distillers, using their farming connections to maximise their effectiveness.⁶⁰ Mathew Minch, operating in the nineteenth century, had similar farming connections which he could exploit. In the post famine period the distilling industry was faced with falling domestic demand for whiskey⁶¹ but the output of the brewing industry was expanding. Between the 1850s and 1914 the output of Irish breweries trebled⁶² and the dominant firm was Guinness which accounted for two thirds of all Irish output by 1914.⁶³

Through the 1860s and 1870s prosperity of Athy continued. The expansion of business in the town is reflected in the increased numbers of traders listed in the town in Slater's Directory for 1856, 1870 and 1881. The Minch business benefited from the increased trade. In the absence of business records destroyed in the 1960s (see above page 32), the expansion can best be examined by looking at the way in which his business premises extended in the vicinity of the Grand Canal. From the original offices and corn store at 1, Canal, Side, by 1864 he had expanded his holding to include the two adjoining buildings previously occupied by Patrick Comins. These comprised a house, offices and yard valued at £12 together with further offices having

a valuation of £13. The Corn store on the original holding was by then described as malt stores.⁶⁴

In 1867 he acquired a 900 year lease on a premises on the north side of William Street, 'lately in the occupation of Minch upon which he has erected buildings'. The premises in question had a frontage of 184 feet on to William Street.⁶⁵ Two years later he was in occupation of a premises with a forty seven foot frontage on the opposite side of the same street. The western side of this holding had a seventy foot front on to the 'Quay or track line of the Grand Canal'.⁶⁶ In 1875 his immediate landlord, Mrs. Mary Comins (widow of Patrick Comins), contracted 'for the absolute sale and transfer' to Minch of all her remaining interests in this premises together with other properties adjoining the canal.⁶⁷ (see Map 2)

As well as expanding his business premises, Matthew Minch seems to have had sufficient spare capital to invest on the informal market for term loans by providing mortgages for some of his business and family connections. In the earlier part of the nineteenth century, one of the best temporary uses for excess capital was to invest in mortgages. Part of the reason for this was the risky nature of the banking system.⁶⁸ Despite improvements, confidence in the system fell from time to time due to bank failures. In 1856 the Tipperary Joint Stock Banking Company collapsed, depriving many depositors of their savings.⁶⁹ The effects of this failure were particularly felt in towns where the bank had branches, which included Athy. In County Tipperary this lack of confidence was still apparent thirty years later.⁷⁰ Minch's investment in local

mortgages appears to follow the pre famine trend when the informal market for term loans was supplied by the wealthy among the professional and commercial class.⁷¹ The link between borrowers and lenders was often provided by lawyers, in cases where the parties were unknown to one another.⁷² Many other mortgages were made 'between relatives or connections by marriage' in the belief that such family links provided additional security.⁷³

In 1866 a mortgage was registered between Denis Reeves, a farmer, of Reevesmount, Athy, and Matthew Minch. The amount of the loan was £300 to be repaid at eight per cent interest per annum. The security involved was Reeves' leasehold interest in a plot at Leinster Street, Athy.⁷⁴ Ten years later another mortgage between the same parties was registered, for £700. This may have been a completely new loan, but it seems probable that the original loan had not been repaid and by then stood at £700. The security for this second mortgage was the plot in Leinster Street together with one hundred acres at Geraldine and Gallowshill.⁷⁵

In the case of Mrs Mary Comins, it appears that Minch's first loan to her was unregistered. In 1867 he obtained a judgement in the court of exchequer against Mrs Comins for £800 plus costs. Apparently she repaid half of this amount and the balance was registered as a mortgage shortly after the judgement. In this case the interest rate was four per cent. The security was 125 acres, Irish plantation measure (c. 200 statute acres) at Ardscull and forty Irish acres (sixty five statute acres) at Woodstock and the Bleach at Canal Side, all occupied by Mrs Comins together with 'all premises and dwelling houses situated on Canal Side and William Street, Athy'

occupied by twenty-nine named tenants including Matthew Minch.⁷⁶ The large amount of security demanded reflects the difficulty Minch had experienced in obtaining payment of the original unregistered debt. The previous year a single plot at Leinster Street was required as security against a loan of £300 to Denis Reeves. For £400 Mrs Comins had to put up 265 statute acres and a substantial holding in Athy, albeit at a lower rate of interest.

This did not prevent further recourse to the court of exchequer by Minch. Two years later, on 11 June 1869 he secured a judgement against Mrs Comins for £540.⁷⁷ In September of the same year Mrs Comins mortgaged a considerable amount of property to Matthew Minch in exchange for a loan of £540. over seven years. The property comprised 114 acres at Ardsull, 31 acres at Bennetsbridge, the 999 year lease (dated 1808) on the William Street premises occupied by Minch (see previous page), together with three plots of land on the Grand Canal with houses, stone buildings, cabins and a store. Five insurance policies amounting to £500 were also assigned to Minch. It seems that much of this property formed part of Mrs Comins marriage settlement because one the parties to the deed was Edmond Cullen 'trustee of her marriage settlement' dated 1841.⁷⁸

In 1870 the second judgement obtained by Minch in the Court of Exchequer (of 11 June 1869) was registered as a mortgage. The £550 secured by that judgement together with £30.6.0 interest and cost of £30.6.0 were still due at the end of April, 1870. The security for this mortgage involved forty acres at Bennetsbridge and

stock and a further three acres on the west side of the Canal in the possession of John Haydon and the cabins thereon. The interest rate in this case was 6.25%.⁷⁹

Eighteen months later the £550 plus interest was still due but Minch nevertheless agreed to lend a further £250 to Mrs Comins. The security this time was the property listed in the deed of 1869 (above page 36)⁸⁰ This debt of £800 was not repaid and therefore in 1875 Mrs Commins contracted 'for the absolute sale and transfer to him of all her remaining interests in the lease on the William Street premises and the lands on the Canal Bank with buildings as listed in the 1869 deed in consideration of the sum of £800 plus £100 plus £25. The land at Ardsull (114 acres) and Bennetsbridge (31 acres) were not included in this sale but for a further £135 she transferred her interest in 22 acres at Bennetsbridge to Minch.⁸¹ Thus, as a result of these mortgages to Mrs. Comins, Matthew Minch added substantially to his holdings in Athy.

The other person to whom Matthew Minch loaned money at this time was 'a connection by marriage'. His wife's father, Murtagh Brennan had been granted a thirty one year lease on a premises in Duke Street by John Rose Byrne in 1845. Brennan also held six acres of land at Ardsull as tenant from year to year. When he died intestate his next of kin were his wife, Mary Brennan and his daughter, Catherine Minch, otherwise Brennan. Mrs Brennan became indebted to her son in law for the sum of £90 and, in 1871, in consideration of that sum, she assigned all her

interest in the land and premises together with goods and chattels of which she was possessed to Matthew Minch.⁸²

In 1874, two years before the expiry of the lease on the Duke Street premises, Minch acquired a new 99 year lease from the heirs of John Rose Byrne. This was to run from March 1876 at a yearly rent of £20.⁸³ Coincidentally, the address of the Byrne family who granted Matthew Minch the 99 year lease on the Duke Street premises, was 'Rockfield' Dundrum, Co. Dublin.⁸⁴ This was also the name of house occupied by Minch and his family since 1871. It is tempting to assume that he chose to call his residence after that of his landlords but it seems the house was so named before he moved there.⁸⁵ The house, at Woodstock North, was occupied by Rev Joseph Keating before the Minchs took up residence.⁸⁶ In 1871 it stood on almost fifty acres and was valued at £10. (This included the outbuildings).⁸⁷ The valuation was increased to £15 in 1890 due to the addition of new outbuildings and a further £3 was added in 1892 when a small return was built on to the house.⁸⁸ In 1901 the house had thirteen rooms with nine windows at the front.⁸⁹ It is a two storied house of five bays as can be seen in illustration 5.

With the expansion of his business in Athy and the acquisition of a substantial residence outside the town, Matthew Minch's view of himself seems to have undergone a change. In various deeds registered in the 1860's he was described as 'corn merchant'⁹⁰, or 'corn factor'⁹¹. By 1870 he was a 'merchant'⁹², in 1871, having acquired the land attached to his home at Woodstock, he was an 'corn merchant and

farmer'⁹³ and by 1874, he was described simply as 'gentleman'.⁹⁴ It is clear that Mathew Minch was ascending the social ladder. His business was expanding and he acquired a substantial residence. As a member of the catholic middle class, he was in a position to send his son to one of the new secondary schools set up by religious orders in the 1850s and 1860s.⁹⁵ The French college in Blackrock, Co. Dublin was established in 1860 by the Holy Ghost Fathers to provide an education for the sons of well to do catholics. Mathew Minch junior attended this school.⁹⁶

Chapter III The Minches' Involvement in Local Politics

While certain catholic families were able to amass some wealth through business or professional activities in the post famine decades, local elected bodies provided them with political experience. Participation on these bodies also gave them status within their communities. Landlords and their representatives had traditionally been responsible for local government in Ireland but the extension of democracy meant that they were joined from the 1840s and 1850s on, by members of the farming and business classes. By the late 1870s these 'popular representatives' began to challenge the power of landlords. The local government act of 1898¹ completely reorganised local administration in Ireland on democratic lines. The elections which followed marked a final shift away from the traditional leadership of the landlords towards the dominance of a new bourgeoisie.² The majority of the newly established county councils were strongly nationalist in character and provided an invaluable forum for training in self government.³ Many of those who were elected to the first county councils had received their political education on the older local bodies. This chapter will focus on local politics in the Athy area and the participation of members of the Minch family in the challenge to landlord power. The local bodies where this challenge took place were the town commission of Athy and the board of guardians of Athy poor law union. Thus a look at these bodies up to the late 1870s provides the background to local politics in the 1880s .

Athy Town Commission

The towns improvement act of 1854⁴ conferred powers of town management on those towns which adopted the act. The provisions of this legislation,⁵ which were widely adopted throughout Ireland, allowed elected town commissions to provide basic services such as lighting, cleaning, paving etc. These services were paid for by levying a rate on property in the town valued at £4 or more. The ratepayers comprised the electorate, while those whose property was valued at £12 or more were eligible to become commissioners (From 1880 all voters became eligible for election.) Individual commissioners went out of office every 3 years but were eligible for re-election.

In the post famine period, business in Athy expanded (see chapter 2). A new group of traders was emerging in Athy and the formation of the town commission provided this group with the opportunity to participate in the administration of the town⁶. By 1863 the membership of the commission comprised a doctor, an apothecary, an auctioneer, three grocers, four drapers, a builder, an hotelier, a miller, a boot and shoemaker and a druggist, oil and colourman⁷. The old corporation of Athy had been under the effective control of the duke of Leinster⁸. The commission however was independent of the landlord but it was dominated by a small number of traders and professional men. For example, among the twenty-seven individuals who were members between 1861 and 1875, their average total length of service was twelve years⁹. (See appendix two) Some of the longest serving commissioners over the life of the commission were: Michael Lawler, grocer

(forty years), Matthew Minch, corn merchant (thirty-five years) and James Leahy, publican (twenty six years)¹⁰. The turnover in membership was not high and they were often 'elected as nominee's of one another' as one elector claimed in 1879¹¹. It was not unusual for commissioners to try to avoid an election. This was the case in 1863 when Matthew Minch first became a member. In October of that year five commissioners stood down by rotation as usual. It seems that all five were anxious to go forward once more and, in the absence of a new candidate, they would all have been automatically re-elected without a vote. However Matthew Minch put himself forward as a candidate and canvassed for votes among the ratepayers and 'out of about 170 electors, 152 pledged themselves to support Mr. Minch'¹². Obviously one of the outgoing members would have been defeated if it went to a vote. In order to prevent this, two of them, Michael Lawlor and James Leahy, drew straws to decide who should stand down. A correspondent to the local newspaper reported that

'it was painfully apparent from the strong feelings exhibited by the great majority of the ratepayers against the most unpopular body in Leinster, that if a straw had not been drawn, two or more of the outgoing five would have been compelled on a poll to relinquish their grasp on a position to which some of them cling with such.... tenacity'¹³.

Michael Lawlor lost the draw and retired, 'leaving a walkover for Mr. Minch'¹⁴.

Without the prospect of an election, the selection meeting was attended by 'not more than twenty persons besides commissioners'¹⁵. Michael Lawlor proposed the election of the other four outgoing commissioners, together with Matthew Minch. Lawlor then 'briefly addressed the meeting and bore flattering testimony to the many qualifications of the new candidate' which 'rendered him in every way worthy of that confidence which

ratepayers of Athy almost unanimously placed in him'¹⁶. The proposal was passed unopposed and the five candidates were thus duly elected. Michael Lawlor did not have to spend long away from the town commission because he was a member by the time the next election came up and must have been co-opted during the year. He went on to become the longest serving member of Athy Town Commission.

An election was once more avoided in 1864 when Dr James Irving stood down in order that Dr. William Clayton could take his place on the commission, when the latter expressed a desire to become a member¹⁷. Between 1868 and 1873, no change in personnel took place on the town commission at all¹⁸. By the end of the 1870s however, new forces were at work which led to 'unusual excitement'¹⁹ at the municipal elections in Athy.

The Board of Guardian of Athy

The poor law unions set up before the famine (see chapter two) were administrated by boards of guardians.²⁰ In the post famine decades new responsibilities in areas other than poor relief were assigned to the boards. These responsibilities included the dispensary system, the inspection of cattle, food and workshops as well as orphans, emigration assistance and sanitation. This extension of their duties was recognised in 1872 when the Local Government Board took over the responsibility for overseeing the guardians from the Poor Law Commission. In order to fund their activities, the boards

were empowered to levy a rate on the owners and occupiers of property in their union. Since both landlords and tenants paid the rates, both groups were entitled to vote in the annual poor law elections. Those with highly rated holdings had multiple votes, up to a maximum of six. The elections did not, however account for all of the guardians. Up to one third of the members of the boards were drawn from among the highest rated justices of the peace residing in the union. There ex officio guardians were almost invariably landlords, while the elected members were usually tenant farmers or local professional and businessmen.²¹ In 1843 the proportion of ex officio guardians on the boards was increased from one third to half.

In the early years of the system most boards of guardians were dominated by landlords. This dominance was reflected in the way in which they monopolised the three officer positions of chairman, vice-chairman and deputy vice-chairman. As late as 1877, eighty-seven per cent of these positions on boards throughout Ireland were held by landlords.²² A breakdown of these figures reveals that ninety-nine per cent of chairmen, ninety-three per cent of vice-chairmen and sixty-nine per cent of deputy vice-chairmen were landlords. There were three boards of guardians in county Kildare. The officers on those of Naas and Celbridge were all landlords, only one of whom owned less than 1,000 acres. In Athy Union however the position was slightly different.²³ From 1875 until 1881 the chairman was F.M. Carroll, J.P. who owned 569 acres in county Kildare²⁴ His family also owned an estate in county Roscomon.²⁵ Daniel Whelan was the vice-chairman over the same period. His family had a licenced grocer in Athy²⁶ and another member of the

family was a town commissioner.²⁷ The deputy vice-chairman, James Leahy had a licenced grocery in Athy and he served for many years on the town commission.²⁸ It is clear that, although the chairman of the Athy board was a landlord, it was not dominated by landlords by the same extent as most other boards. In fact the chairman was frequently absent from meetings of the board. In 1879 it was suggested by the member that 'a gentleman... who could attend more regularly than F.M. Carroll, J.P.' should be selected as chairman. .²⁹ This proposal failed to get much support at the meeting. However the fact of the chairman's frequent absence meant that it was usually an elected member who was acting chairman and was thus in a position to control the meetings. This became especially important when political questions began to come before the board for discussion during the land war.

The Land war.

The last three years of the 1870s saw poor harvests combined with falling prices for many agricultural commodities in Ireland. This led to serious hardship for farmers particularly in the west of the country. In 1879 predictions of a crisis comparable with the great famine were repeatedly made in the press and at tenants meetings throughout the country. What made this particular crisis unprecedented was not the distress it caused but the political reaction to the distress. .³⁰ Local tenants' movements demanding land reform attracted considerable public support in the west of Ireland. Nationalist politicians, seeing the potential of this support, came together to negotiate a policy of co-operation on the

land question. This led to the 'new departure' in 1878 which combined members of the physical force republican movement, the fenians, with members of the tenant right advocates. ³¹ In October 1879 the Irish National Land League was formed by Michael Davitt and Charles Stewart Parnell. ³² One of the primary aims of the league was to bring about rent reductions but the more radical members like Michael Davitt, aimed for an end to the landlord system.

Although land agitation began in the west of Ireland and the land league became established there before it spread to other parts of the country, the feeling of crisis was widespread. It was not confined to farmers. The business of shopkeepers, traders, banks, and other providing credit was closely linked to the agricultural economy, thus townspeople felt the effects of the depression also. The economy of county Kildare was relatively strong and although the agricultural crisis did have an effect in the county, it did not result in the type of mass destitution which occurred in western counties. ³³ In Athy the sense of crisis was apparent from early in 1879. A public meeting in February heard of the series of 'very sore trials' the town had gone through. These included three years of deficient crops, low prices and raised rents, an outbreak of smallpox and the decline in the markets and fairs in the town. ³⁴ The meeting had been organised by traders from Barrack Street, where the pig fair was held. Much criticism at this meeting was directed at the failure of the town commission to properly regulate the pig fair. Although the meeting was ostensibly about the pig fair, it was also the beginning of a challenge to the small group who had hitherto dominated the town commission.

As the municipal elections approached in the autumn of 1879, many of the same protestors met 'to consider the best means to be adopted to put men into the commission who would properly represent the town'. .³⁵ A committee was formed to advocate the election of Michael Doyle, who had presided over the February meeting, and James Nugent to the town commission. This committee passed 'several resolutions condemnatory of the present commissioners'. .³⁶ This activity was discussed at the monthly meeting of the town commission. James Leahy in particular, took exception to the actions of 'certain gentlemen who are anxious to air their eloquence as commissioners.' While acknowledging that the 'opponents of the present commissioners' were 'only too anxious to oppose' him, he seemed to deliberately provoke them by proposing a motion to move the pig fair from Barrack Street to the Fair Green. An attempt at a compromise by Matthew Minch among others, was defeated on the casting vote of the chairman Edward Lord. Two of the commissioners then offered to resign but Leahy protested. The commissioners were urged to stand together against 'the petty-minded opposition'.³⁷ The resignations were not accepted making an election inevitable. As a result, Michael Doyle and James Nugent were elected, defeating two outgoing commissioners. One of those who lost his seat was the former chairman Edward Lord who was the representative of the duke of Leinster. .³⁸ On the night that the election results were announced 'several houses were illuminated and the non-electors celebrated the occasion by potations supplied at the expence of two or three of the successful candidates'. .³⁹ Michael Doyle immediately made his presence felt on the the town commission. At the special meeting to



elect a new chairman he objected when James Leahy proposed the customary vote of thanks to the previous chairman who had been defeated in the election. Doyle said that although he respected Edward Lord as a 'private gentleman' he believed that Leahy's proposition was intended not as a complement to Lord, but 'as a stab to the ratepayers for the recent action they have thought fit to take'.⁴⁰ At the first ordinary meeting of the town commission after the election, Doyle objected to items of normal business such as the signing of minutes and the payment of various bills.⁴¹ The small group who had hitherto controlled the town commission were thus being challenged by the emergence of new, less deferential type of politician.

The Leinster Lease

Edward Lord's position as agent of the duke of Leinster may have contributed to his defeat at the municipal election in 1879. Until the 1870s the duke had been regarded as a major benefactor to Athy.(see chapter two). His popularity declined however due to the introduction of the Leinster lease. This has been introduced on the Leinster estate in order to prevent tenants from claiming compensation under the 1870 land act.⁴² In 1878 the Athy Board of Guardians received a copy of the Leinster lease in respect of a parcel of land which they held from the duke. When the question of signing the lease came up for discussion at a board meeting in early 1879 Daniel Whelan was the acting chairman in the absence of F.M. Carroll. Whelan, described the lease as being 'directly opposed to the provisions of the land act of 1870 and the liberty of the subject.' A majority of the

seen as a clash between their rights as elected representatives and the undemocratic power of the landlord. The duke demonstrated his power when he eventually evicted the board from the land in question. .⁴³ The Leinster lease continued to provide a focus for tenant grievances in Co. Kildare during the land war. In January 1881 a copy of the lease was publically burnt on a 1798 pike at a land league meeting in Kildare town (see illustration 6). In 1882 at a meeting of the Athy guardians Daniel Whelan referred once more to the duke of Leinster and 'the land from which he evicted us'.⁴⁴

James Leahy, M.P.

At the beginning of 1880 political activity in county Kildare was concentrated on the general election to be held in March and April. The county was represented at that time by two M.Ps, and until 1874 the constituency was dominated by the Liberal party. Members of two local landowning families, the Cogans and the Fitzgeralds held the seats for most of the 1850s and 1860s. In 1874 however, the home rule candidate C.H. Meldon, defeated Lord Otlo Fitzgerald, a son of the duke of Leinster. Meldon joined the Rt. Hon. W.H.F. Cogan as a representative for county Kildare. After being a member of parliament for twenty-eight years, Cogan retired in 1880 and was replaced as the Liberal candidate by the Rt. Hon. Roderick Moore O' Farrall, another landowner and a former M.P. who had represented the county from 1859 to 1865. Moore O' Farrall was opposed by three home rule candidates C.H. Meldon, A.W. Harris, and James Leahy of Athy.⁴⁵

Leahy was of course already a well known figure in the Athy area being a member of the town commission and deputy vice chairman of the board of guardians. It was these two bodies which organised the meeting at which Leahy was chosen as a candidate for the election. Leahy was one of the more radical members of the home rule party who supported Parnell's alliance with the land movement. He was the only one of the three home rule candidates in county Kildare who declared support for Parnell in the campaign for leadership of the party.⁴⁶

In the general election the home rule candidates won almost eighty per cent of the votes cast in country Kildare. Meldon and Leahy were elected and the liberal party lost the seat it had held in the county since the 1830s.⁴⁷ The overall result of the election led to the formation of the Liberal government under William Gladstone. The home rule party had sixty-three members in the new parliament. The Parnell faction had the support of less than half the members but succeeded in electing Parnell as chairman of the party in May 1880.⁴⁸

The land league in Athy

Members of the land league had taken part in James Leahy's election campaign.⁴⁹ but it was not until October 1880 that a branch of the league was formed in Athy.⁵⁰ Most of the activity of the Athy branch, as reported in the local press, was confined to

meetings of the committee. This committee was dominated not by tenant farmers but by local businessmen, many of whom were already active in local politics. James Leahy was the branch president while Dr. P O'Neill a former town commissioner was the vice-president. .⁵¹ The treasurer, secretary and five other committee members had taken part in the protest meetings regarding the pig fair in 1879. .⁵² These included Michael Doyle and James Nugent who were elected to the town commission as a result of those protests. The committee also included two members of the Athy Board of Guardians. .⁵³ One committee member who was making his first venture into local politics was Matthew J. Minch who was then twenty-six years of age and had joined his father in the corn merchant business. The senior Minch was at this time chairman of the town commission but he took no part in the land league committee.

The Athy branch of the league did not attract much support among the local farmers. The main strategy of the league all over Ireland was to advise tenants to seek rent reductions. The Athy committee advised tenants to offer a rent equal to griffith's valuation (the valuation put on their farms almost thirty years earlier). Most of the tenants on the Leinster estate however accepted the duke's counter offer of a twenty per cent rent reduction. .⁵⁴ Dr. O'Neill resigned as vice-president of the branch in protest at the farmer's action which he claimed had broken the back bone of the league'. .⁵⁵ Matthew J. Minch was elected vice-president in his place in July 1881. .⁵⁶

The continuing agrarian violence in many parts of Ireland convinced the chief secretary, W.E. Forster that stringent action had to be taken against the leaders of the land league. Coercion legislation was therefore introduced which allowed for the imprisonment of suspected persons without trial. This was balanced a month later by the publication of Gladstone's new land bill which effectively conceded the less radical demands of the land league. Fair rents were to be determined by an independent commission, tenants paying these rents were to be secure from eviction and a tenants right to sell his interest in his holding with only minimal reference to his landlord was recognised. ⁵⁷ The more radical members of the land league however were determined to press for peasant proprietorship and an end to the landlord system together. In addition, those tenants who had been worst affected by the agricultural depression and who had large rent arrears were excluded from the land bill and continued to agitate.

For the Athy branch of the league, it was the exclusion of leaseholders rather than the exclusion of tenants in arrears which caused criticism of the land bill. At a meeting to consider the bill in April 1881, Matthew J. Minch claimed that the exclusion of leaseholders affected those in county Kildare more than in other parts of Ireland. James Leahy wondered whether this exclusion was particularly aimed at tenants of the duke of Leinster, who had been forced to accept leases. After a lengthy discussion Minch proposed that the bill should be supported in parliament, with the proviso that the section excluding leaseholders be amended. This resolution was passed.⁵⁸ At the same meeting

Minch's name went forward for the election of a delegate to the national land league convention but John Cantwell, the branch secretary was elected as the Athy delegate.

In September a meeting of the Athy branch discussed the lack of support it received from tenant farmers. This was a special meeting held to elect officers for the coming year. James Leahy was re-elected as president and he called for efforts to bring farmers into the league so that they would not 'have it thrown in their face that they were a land league of non-farmers.' When Matthew Minch was nominated for vice-president he insisted that a farmer should hold that position. He had heard it said 'that the men of Athy should not be dictating to farmers who were not participating in the organisation'. Minch's name did go forward but he was defeated by Thomas O'Beirne a farmer who was also a member of the Athy board of guardians. Minch was however, re-elected to the committee.⁵⁹

The weakness of the Athy branch of the land league was criticised by more committed activists particularly those in Kildare town branch which dominated the league in county Kildare. ⁶⁰ In spite of these difficulties, the Athy branch provided an opportunity for men like Matthew J. Minch to become active on the local political scene. Contacts made at meetings and the publicity they attracted in the local press led to Minch's involvement on other public activities. This enabled him to build up a public profile in Athy. In August 1881 for example he presided at a meeting to protest at a proposed Sunday closing act. He was elected president of the Licenced Grocers and Vinters

Association, in spite of the fact that he had no personal involvement in the licenced trade.⁶¹ In September he was selected as honorary secretary of a committee formed to honour James Leahy M.P. at a public banquet.⁶²

In spite of the passage of the land act in August 1881 violence continued in some parts of the country. In October the land league was suppressed and its leaders were arrested under the coercion act. Local activists were also imprisoned including John Cantwell secretary of the Athy branch.⁶³ In the meantime eligible tenants began to apply to the land court, set up under the act, for rent reductions. With average reductions of about twenty per cent being granted, large numbers of tenants applied. However, the exclusion of those tenants who were most in need of relief due to rent arrears led to more localised violence. The fact that the land league leaders were in jail only served to heighten the tension. In this situation local government bodies which had usually avoided political discussion began to introduce motions criticising the government's policy. In December 1881 for example, a resolution from the Cork Municipal Council calling for the release of prisoners held under the coercion act, came before the Athy Board of Guardians. The chairman F.M. Carroll, was forced by pressure from the other members to put this motion to the board while dissenting from it himself. The motion was then passed by the board.⁶⁴ In January 1882 Michael Doyle proposed a similar resolution at a meeting of the town commission. Two of the protestant members objected to the introduction of such 'vexed questions' which had nothing to do with the business of the town, and which would give 'a slap in the face' to the government. Doyle's imputation that these members wanted to

keep those men longer in 'their dungeous' led to a walkout by some of the commissioners so that the motion was passed without opposition.⁶⁵ The politicisation of public bodies in Kildare and the surrounding counties was apparent in the poor law elections of March 1882. *The Leinster Leader*, admittedly a nationalist newspaper, reported that 'landlords and their nominees endeavoured to struggle against the popular might but they were routed everywhere and driven from their usurped positions.'⁶⁶ In the Athy union four seats were contested and the out-going guardians were all defeated by land league candidates.⁶⁷ When the new board met, F.M. Carroll was defeated in the election for chairman by James Leahy, M.P. Daniel Whelan was unanimously re-elected as vice-chairman and one of the new land league guardians was elected as deputy vice-chairman.⁶⁸ A return of the attendance of guardians at board meetings from March 1882 to March 1883 shows that F.M. Carroll never attended during that period. The rate of absention among ex officio guardians was very high, twenty out of twenty-nine of them never attended at the board during the year in question. The ex officis put in a total of thirty eight appenences at board meetings while the twenty nine elected guardians recorded five hundred and five attendances.⁶⁹

By the spring of 1882 the level of violence in Ireland convinced Gladstone and Parnell that an argreement had to be found. The resulting 'Kilmainham treaty' as it was called provided for the release of suspects, a settlement of the question of arrears and the extention of the benefits of the land act to leaseholders. In return, Parnell agreed to try to bring agrarian violence to an end. W.E. Forster rejected the concessions agreed to by his

prime minister and he resigned as chief secretary in protest. The release of suspects was greeted in Athy with an impromptu public meeting. Bands played, the town was illuminated and an effigy of Forster was burnt.⁷⁰ The mood quickly changed to shock however, at the news that the new chief secretary and his assistant had been murdered shortly after arriving in Dublin. A public meeting, to express the 'indignation and horror' felt in Athy was attended by both Minchs.⁷¹ The passage of the arrears of rent act in August 1882 removed a major source of grievance and effectively brought the land war to an end. The land agitation had mobilised and politicised a great number of Irish people. Rent reductions and security of tenure had been achieved but landlord tenant relations had been changed. The more radical aim of peasant proprietorship created a new aspiration which challenged the legitimacy of the landlord system. The land war had also brought to prominence a new political elite, at both national and local level, who were no longer willing to defer to the traditional leadership of the landlords.

Politics 1882 -1886

Over the following four years Parnell and his colleagues used the politicisation of the Irish public to build up the home rule party. At the local level support was organised through branches of the Irish National League founded in October 1882. The Athy branch was set up on 17 March 1883 and its leading members included many of those, who had been active in the land league.⁷² This enabled men like Matthew J. Minch to keep up their public profile. The support of local catholic clergy for the new organisation in Athy was

in marked contrast to the lack of clerical involvement in the land league branch. Clerical influence was apparent in the local poor law election of 1883. One of the defeated conservative candidates complained to the Local Government Board about the activity of one curate during the election.⁷³ When the new board met to elect a chairman, James Leahy was defeated following criticism of his performance by a local parish priest at the inaugural meeting of the national league branch.⁷⁴ This reflected a problem common to many Irish M.P.s. Their attendance at parliament decreased the influence they had over local events. This increased their dependence on the home rule party because of the dominance of central control over the selection of candidates for parliamentary elections.

An extension of the franchise in 1884 swelled the nationalist vote thus increasing the power base of the home rule party, so that in the general election of December 1885 it won eighty-six seats. This gave Parnell the balance of power in parliament which he used to support a conservative government following overtures on the home rule question. This alliance was short-lived however and in January 1886 the home rule members defeated the government and Gladstone became prime minister once more. In return Gladstone introduced a home rule bill in April. The defeat of this bill led to another general election in July 1886 which was fought on the issue of home rule for Ireland. This election consolidated the position of the home rule party. Over half of the party's eighty-six M.P.s being returned unopposed. In the United Kingdom as a whole the conservatives returned to power with a large majority, thus effectively removing home rule from the

parliamentary agenda for the lifetime of the government. This focussed attention in Ireland back to the land question.

On the local political scene in Athy meanwhile, Matthew J. Minch continued to maintain his public profile. As he himself claimed at a meeting of ratepayers in march 1885 he had 'taken ample part in any movement which had for its object the advancement of the town.' The meeting was held to select candidates for the Athy division in the poor law elections. In spite of criticisms of the sitting guardians it was decided to support the re-election of the three Athy members. Minch proposed this resolution but he also gave notice of his willingness to stand for election the following year if the sitting guardians failed to give satisfaction.⁷⁵ In fact he did not have to wait for a year before the opportunity presented itself. James Leahy M.P. resigned as a guardian in December 1885 because his parliamentary duties prevented his regular attendance at board meetings.⁷⁶ He was replaced by Matthew J. Minch

In October 1886 Minch also joined his father on Athy Town Commission. The younger Minch was returned without an election due to the retirement of a sitting member. W.P. St. John, according to his letter of resignation, had been informed 'that if one of the protestant or conservative commissioners retired it would be the means of avoiding a contested election'.⁷⁷ Thus Minch took his place on the second elected forum in Athy. It was not long before the land question enabled him to further enhance his local reputation.

The Plan of Campaign.

The land courts set up under the 1881 land act had reduced rents by about twenty per cent, but from 1884 poor weather and weak prices returned, reducing general agricultural prices by about thirty per cent. In response to localised agitation for further rent reductions some nationalist M.P. s advocated a 'plan of campaign' in 1886. Tenants were to combine to offer an agreed 'fair rent' to their landlord. If this was refused all rents would be withheld and used to support evicted tenants on the estate in question. The plan was adopted on over one hundred estates throughout the country.⁷⁸ Some landlords settled quickly while others began to evict. Public opinion in Ireland and Britain was aroused in 1887 by mass evictions on estates such as that of the marquis of Lansdowne at Luggacurran near Stradbally in Queen's county.⁷⁹ This area formed part of the Athy poor law union and one of the largest tenants on the Luggacurran estate was in fact J.W. Dunne⁸⁰ who had been chairman of the Athy Board of Guardians since 1883.¹ The evictions attracted widespread publicity. In September several English radicals and liberal M.Ps visited the scene which was the occasion of a major demonstration attended by delegates from all the surrounding counties. Matthew J. Minch was among the town commissioners and poor law guardians who represented Athy.⁸²

The Athy Board of Guardians granted outdoor relief to some of the evicted tenants at Luggacurran but these payments were deemed to be partly illegal by the local government auditor.⁸³ The guardians refused to pay the surcharge of £136. The auditor

brought a case against Daniel Whelan to recover the money on the grounds that he had signed the relief lists as acting chairman of the board. In April 1888 a decree was granted against Whelan at Athy petty sessions⁸⁴ which he refused to pay until the sherrif seized some of his stock to pay the debt. The seizure generated widespread local protests⁸⁵ and the board of guardians responded to the protests at the 'behest' of Matthew J. Minch. He proposed that three guradians should sign a cheque for £136 in favour of Daniel Whelan in defiance of the Local Government Board. When these guardians were surcharged the process could be repeated. When he first proposed this action he failed to get enough support at the board meeting⁸⁶ but the subsequent publicity brought about a change in the attitude of the guardians so that the proposal was carried unanimously. A cheque for £136 was signed by J.W. Dunne, James Mc Loughlin and Matthew J. Minch.⁸⁷ A week later the Local Government Board dissolved the Athy Board of Guardians and appointed two paid vice-guardians to run the union.⁸⁸ A public meeting held in Athy to protest at the action of the Local Government Board was attended by a large and representative crowd which displayed 'enthusiasm and determination to stand firmly by the guardians'. Minch was very well recieved at the meeting at which he spoke.⁸⁹ At Minch's suggestion a further public protest took place on Tuesday 26 June, the day when the guardians would normally have met to tranact their business. Twenty two of the elected guardians assembled at the town hall and proceeded to the union workhouse. They were accompanied by several catholic curates and a large number of townspeople. Since it was market day a number of country people joined in the procession as it went through the corwded streets of the town. On arriving at the

workhouse, they found the gates locked with about a dozen policemen inside the grounds. In reply to a note sent in by Minch, the vice guardians stated that the former guardians had no business in the workhouse and that they would not be admitted. Having restrained the crowd from pushing down the gates, the guardians proceeded back to the town, 'in professional order' accompanied by the cheering crowd.⁹⁰

Protest meetings continued to be held in Athy and resolutions in support of the guardians were passed by the town commission, and the local national league branches.⁹¹ Reports were carried in national newspapers and questions were also asked in parliament about the action of the Local Government Board.⁹² Matthew J. Minch continued to take an active part in local meetings. He was one of the principal speakers at a very large meeting held in Athy in October to hear reports from local M.P.s and to protest at the dissolution of the board of guardians. Between ten and fifteen thousand people attended this meeting including delegations from nineteen national league branches and seven G.A.A. clubs. The square of Athy was filled with people, bands played and flags and banners were displayed.⁹³ Two weeks after the meeting Matthew J. Minch was elected chairman of Athy Town Commission.⁹⁴

In January he received further publicity when the local government auditor disallowed the £136 paid to Daniel Whelan and sued the three guardians who had signed the cheque. At Athy petty sessions it was Minch who spoke on behalf of the guardians. He raised objections which he knew would be dismissed in order that they might be, used

'in the case of an appeal'. In the middle of these arguments a local curate came into court and informed Minch that £136 had been lodged to the union's account in the bank. The case against the guardians was therefore dismissed.⁹⁵

All of this publicity helped to further the political career of Matthew J. Minch. When the Athy Board of Guardians was reinstated in July 1889 he was unimously elected chairman.⁹⁶ Thus at the age of thirty-five he was chairman of both of the elected bodies in Athy. When the home rule party split as a result of Parnell's involvement in the O'Shea divorce case, Minch sided with the majority anti-Parnellite wing of the party. He was the obvious candidate to run against the sitting M.P, James Leahy, in the general election of 1892. Minch won over seventy per cent of the votes cast in the south Kildare constituency.⁹⁷ He was re-elected unopposed in 1895 and again in 1900.⁹⁸ He continued as chairman of the Athy Board of Guardians until 1899 when most of its powers were taken over by the new Kildare County Council, of which he was also a member. Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century Minch was certainly one of the most important men in county Kildare in terms of political power and influence.

Conclusion

When Matthew Minch snr. died in 1898, a gloom came over the town of Athy according to reports in the local paper. *The Leinster Leader* devoted almost an entire page to a description of the funeral which included a long list of those who attended.¹ The importance of this was apparent the following week when an apology appeared in the paper because the name of one individual 'was accidentally omitted from the list of those attending Mr. Minch's funeral'.² Tributes were paid at meeting's of the Board of Guardians, the Town Commission, the School Attendance Committee and the Athy Loan Bank and many of these bodies adjourned as a mark of respect.³ The reaction to his death reflects the prominent place he held in the local community. His emergence from a relatively obscure family background has been the subject of this thesis. Matthew J. Minch built on his father's success to become one of the most important men not only in Athy but in County Kildare.

Although the experience of the Minch family was exclusive to them, they shared many characteristics with others of their class. Matthew Minch snr. was born in 1820 to a catholic tenant farmer with a relatively large farm. Their living conditions were fairly modest as reflected in their house. This frugality probably helped many families of this class to survive the difficult economic circumstances of the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The saving capacity of such families also enabled them to provide for younger members as a sort of compensation for rights ceded to the inheriting son.⁴ The role played by marriage in promoting the welfare of the family as a whole was also an important aspect of life for such people. All of these factors

were part of the experience of the Minch family. In addition they also showed a willingness to become involved in local administrative affairs for example on the special vestry of Timolin parish, in spite of religious differences (see p. 11). The planting of trees on the farm at Portersize also showed an inclination to take advantage of opportunities which presented themselves.

In the next generation Matthew Minch adopted the marriage practice of the family to a town situation which helped to broaden his contacts among the business community in Athy. He took advantage of the town's position as a centre of the corn trade and the capital he acquired in this business was used to provide loans to local contacts. Thus he acquired more property in Athy. He also became involved in public service on the town commission, thus increasing his status in the community. One important result of his wealth and status was the education which his son received in the new catholic secondary school run by the Holy Ghost fathers in Blackrock.

This education, combined with family wealth allowed Matthew J. Minch to devote himself to politics on a wider scale than his father. The land war provided him with the opportunity to become a public figure. He also took advantage of the situation that emerged on the board of guardians as a result of the evictions at Luggacurran to build on his reputation as a nationalist. The support of groups like the this local vitners and of the catholic clergy was also very important particularly after the franchise was extended to non property holders in 1885. The strength of the Home rule party under the central control of Parnell was important but there was an inherent problem which came to the fore after the split in the party. Irish M.P.s had to spend a

lot of time away from their constituencies. James Leahy for example had to resign from the Athy Board of Guardians due to his frequent absence. This enabled local activists like Minch to build up a power base. After the split in the party his public profile, together with the support of the clergy ensured his election to Parliament.

This came about largely as a result of national political developments over which Minch had no control. However decisions taken earlier in the century to promote the welfare of the family as a whole, combined with a willingness to take advantage of opportunities which arose and to engage in public service were also important. The vacuum which arose after the landlords began to loose their power and status in local communities was quickly filled by men like Minch. As a result of strategies previously pursued by their families such men had the means, the education and the local reputation which enabled them to take over much of the power and influence previously held by the landlords.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. K. Theodore Hoppen, Ireland since 1800, conflict and conformity (London, 1989), p. 87.
2. Mark Bence - Jones, Twilight of the ascendancy (London, 1993), p.17

CHAPTER I

1. Irish Telephone directory .1985, parts 1 & 2. 1985 was the last year in which part 2 of the telephone directory covered all of the republic of Ireland outside the 01 (Dublin) area. Eleven Minchs were listed between the two volumes. Contact by letter with all of these listed, confirmed a family origin in county Kildare.
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6. Inscription on Minch headstone,
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 10. '7 Jun. 1807 John to Patrick Minch and Hanna nee Neil, Timloin' in Index to Castledermot roman catholic parish registers, i, baptisims 1789 - 1899, p. 200 (Kildare County Library).
 11. '20 Aug. 1808, John to Patrick Minch and Anne nee Neil, Timolin' , Ibid.
 12. 'Minch, Patrick, Timolin, publican, intestacy 1810', Index to Dublin wills 1800 - 1858, in 30th report of deputy keeper of the public records of Ireland (Dublin, 1899), p. 754
 13. Post chaise companion or travellers directory through Ireland (Dublin, 1803), p. 315.

14. The title applotment survey records holdings in Irish plantation acres. The Minch holding was 43.5 acres which is equivalent to the 71 statute acres recorded in Griffiths Valuation. T.A.B. Timolin, 1827 p. 37; Griffith's Valuation, Athy p. 57
15. 'Matthew Minch of Portersize, died 23 Mar. 1846, aged 72 years;
Minch headstone, Crookstown
16. The marriage entry of their son in the parish register gives her surname as Whelan '13 May 1868 marriage of Micheal Minch son of Matthew and Anna nee Whelan of Portersize', Narraghmore r.c. parish registers 1827- 80, N.L. microfilm P. 6485.
17. 'His wife Anna died 14 Apr. 1866 aged 78,'
Minch headstone, Crookstown
18. 'Michael Minch died 27 Oct. 1893 aged 73 years',
Minch headstone, Crookstown; 'Matthew Minch died 7 Nov. 1898 aged 78 years' Minch headstone, Barrowhouse cemetery
19. Michael took over the running of the farm on the death of his father, this was usually the prerogative of the eldest son. Also a copy of a grant of arms in the genealogical office mentions Matthew Patrick Minch as a great great grandson

of the Minchael Minch of Portersize. This implies that Michael Minch (born c. 1820) was the grandson of Michael Minch. The eldest son was usually called after the paternal grandfather. G.O. Ms IIIg. fol. 46.

20. 'George Minch died 3 May 1891 aged 64 years'
Minch headstone, Crookstown
21. 'Patrick Minch died 17 Dec. 1863 aged 34 years'
Minch headstone, Crookstown
22. 'His daughters Rose and Ellen who died young'
Minch headstone, Crookstown
23. 'His daughter Rosanna died 1 Sept. 1846 aged 14 years'
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32. Ibid.
33. Thomas Rawson, Statistical survey of the County of Kildare.
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34. Ibid, p.8
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37. 'Drake to Wilson', 18 May 1824, R.D. 792 74 535209

38. McCracken, 'Register of trees,' p. 58-9
39. Rawson, Statistical survey, p.74
40. McCracken, 'Register of trees,' p. 58-9
41. T.A.B. Timolin, p.23
42. O'Hara, 'Quakerism in Carlow and Kildare', p.107
43. 'Drake to Wilson', 18 May 1824, R.D. 792 74 535209
44. 'Drake to Wilson', 25 Apr. 1843, R.D. 1843, 7 39
45. 'Drake to Whelan' 4 Apr. 1838, R.D. 1838 6 211
46. T.A.B., Timolin p.37
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Giffith's Valuation, Athy, p. 57

50. Census Ireland, 1851.
51. Griffiths Valuation, Athy, p. 57.
52. 'Matthew Minch, of Portersize, died 23 Mar. 1846 aged 72 years;
'His daughter Rosanna died 1 Sept. 1846 aged 14 years'
Minch headstone, Crookstown
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Michael Minch is listed as the occupier of the farm in Portersize.
55. V.O. cancelled books, Balitore 1859-1932
56. N.A. census return form 1901, Co. Kildare 29/6, no. 5
57. Samuel Lewis, Topographical dictionary, ii, p. 84
58. Census Ireland, 1901
59. see chapter 2

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marriage entry in Index to Athy r.c parish registers, 1753-1899,
(marriages A-Z,) p.142
61. The valuation lists are unclear as to the date of the change of occupier.
Changes between the published valuation (1852) and 1858 seem to have been
recorded for the first time in 1858. (V.O. cancelled books, Athy urban,
1858-73
63. Once again changes in the valuation lists are unclear. Matthew was replaced
as the occupier by Patrick but no date is given for this change.
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65. 'Calender of wills and administrations, 1858-77', 1864, no.6, N.A.
66. 'James and others to Minch', 13. Nov. 1874, R.D. 1875 10 31
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74. '13 May 1968, marriage of Michael Minch, son of Matthew and Anna nee Whelan of Portersize, to Sarah Murphy, daughter of Michael and Julia nee Morrin of Lipstown'
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79. '13 Nov. 1871, baptism of Matthew Lawrence Minch, sponsors George Minch and Julia Murphy'. Narraghmore r.c parish register, 1827-80, N.L. microfilm P. 6485
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81. Griffiths Valuation, Athy, pp 124-5
82. A note in the margin of the register, beside the baptism of Michael Joseph Minch, records his subsequent marriage to Mary Broughal in 1938. Monasterevin r.c. parish registers, 1819-1899, Kildare heritage project, Newbridge, Co. Kildare
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Kildare county library
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42. See appendix. In both cases the eldest son was called Thomas and although both had an older daughter, the second one in each family was baptised Honor/Honora. This indicates that James and Patrick Minch were the sons of Thomas and probably Honora. These are the names of the couple buried in Kilrush cemetery in 1824 and 1840. Both James and Patrick also had sons called Mathew, and if they were the sons of Thomas and Honora Minch of Kilrush, they also had a brother called Mathew. That christian name recurs in all branches of the Minch family.
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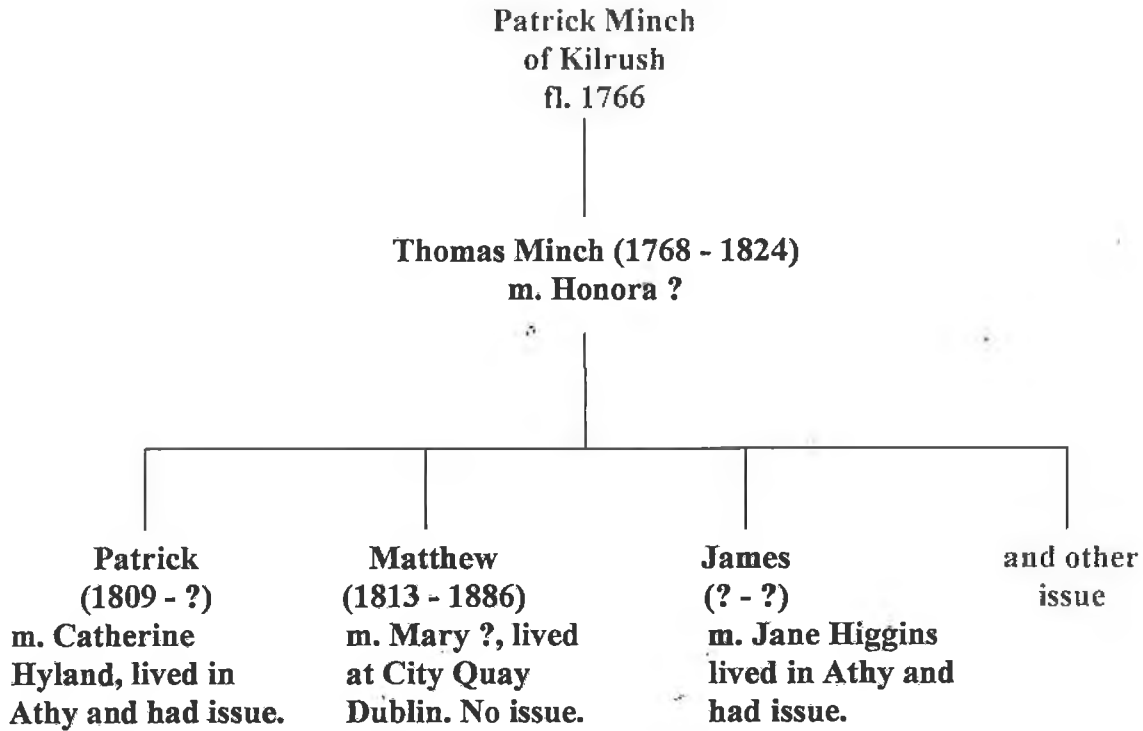
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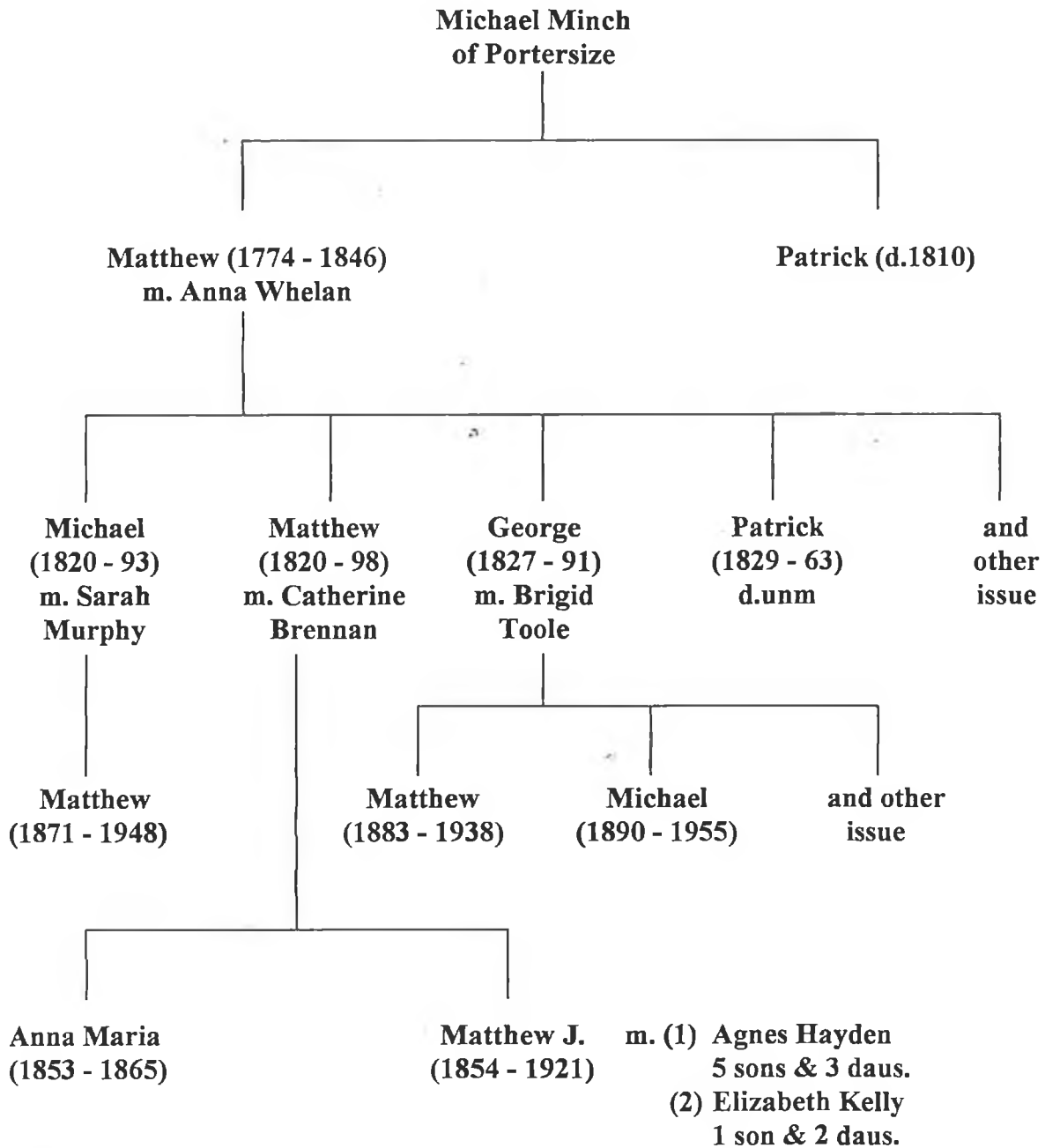
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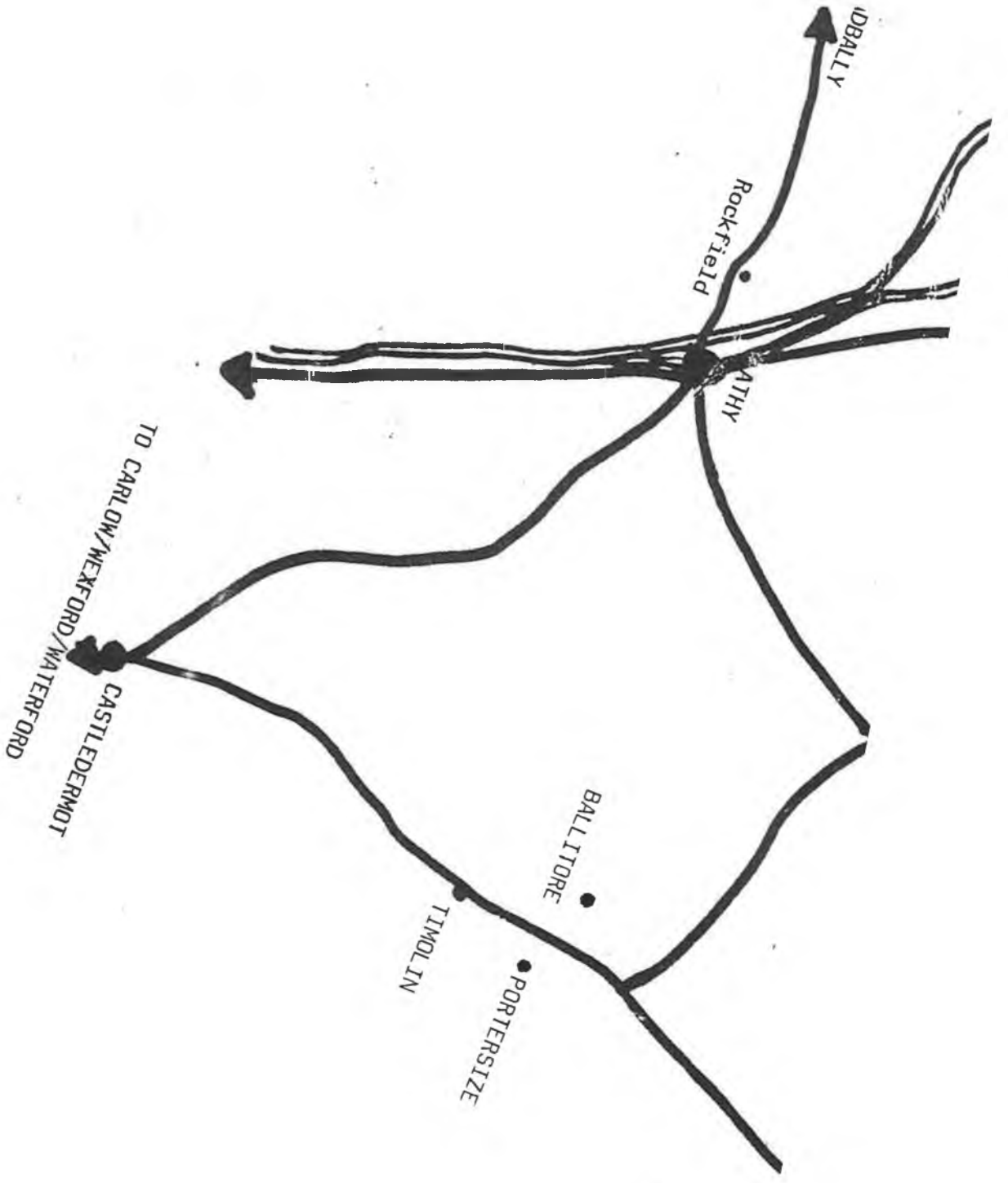


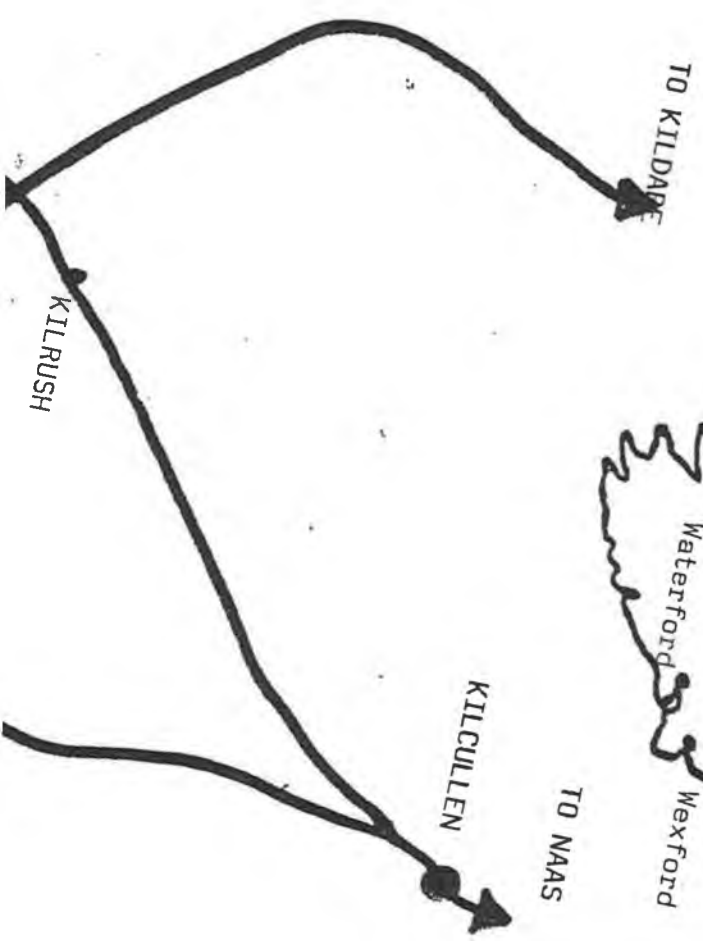
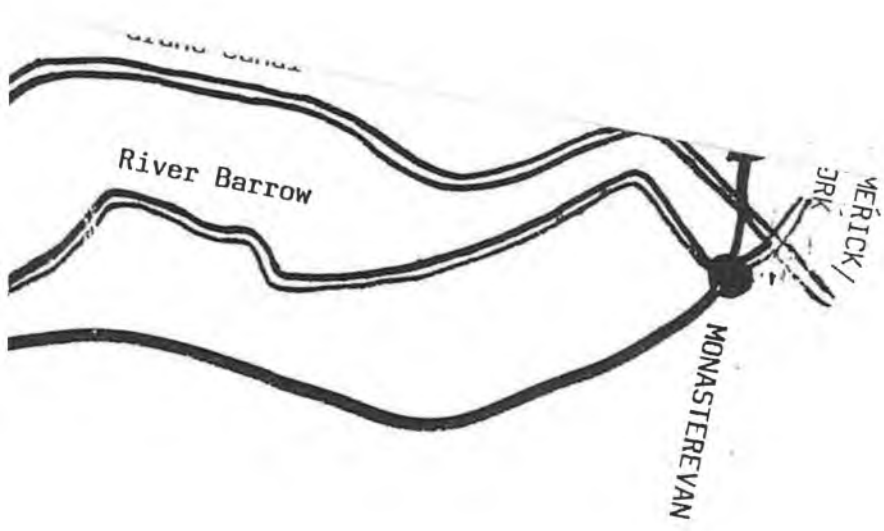
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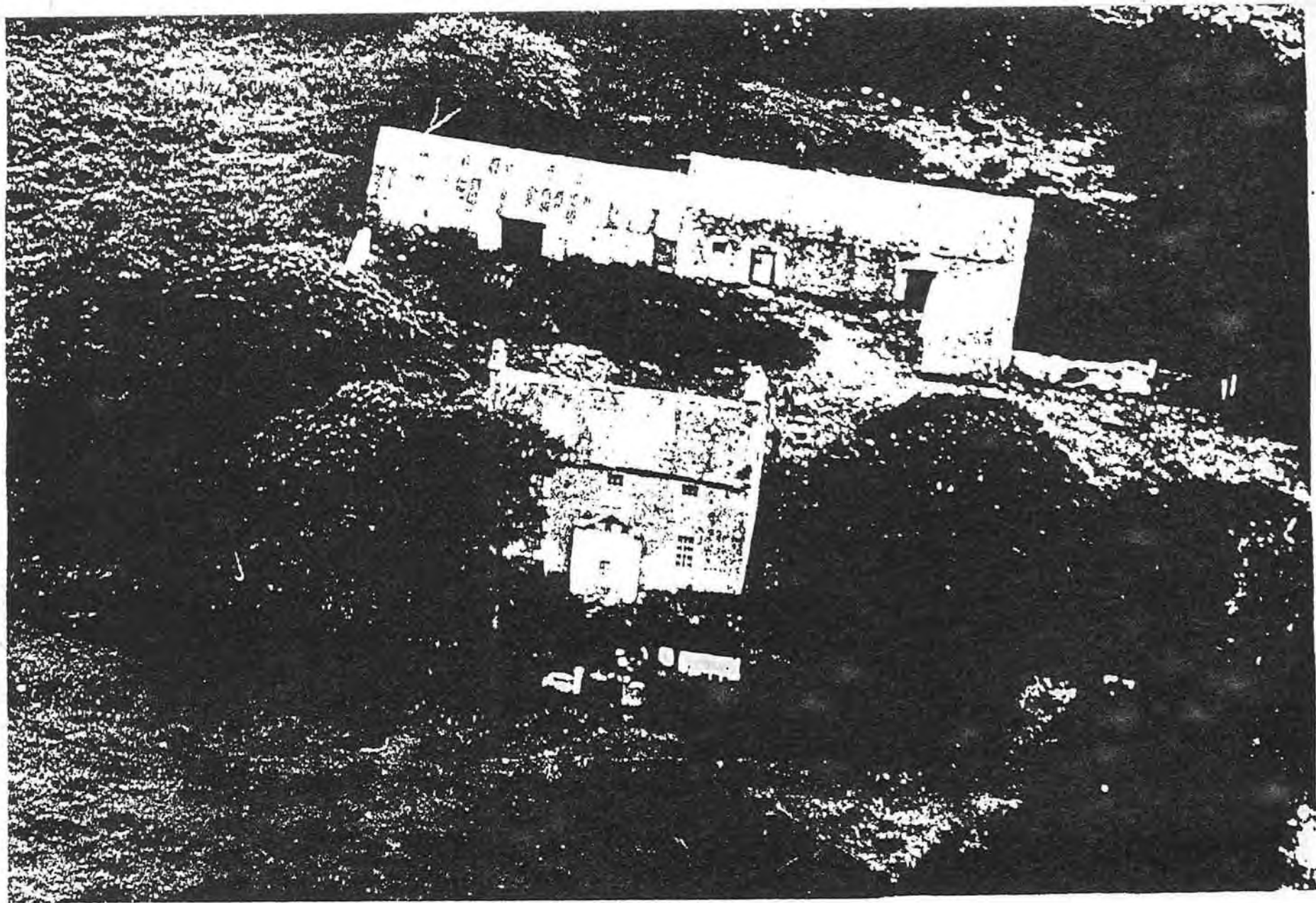
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|--------|---|--------------------------|
| fl. | - | alive in |
| m. | - | married |
| d.unm. | - | died unmarried |
| daus. | - | daughters |
| : | - | relationship not certain |

THE MINCHS OF PORTERSIZE

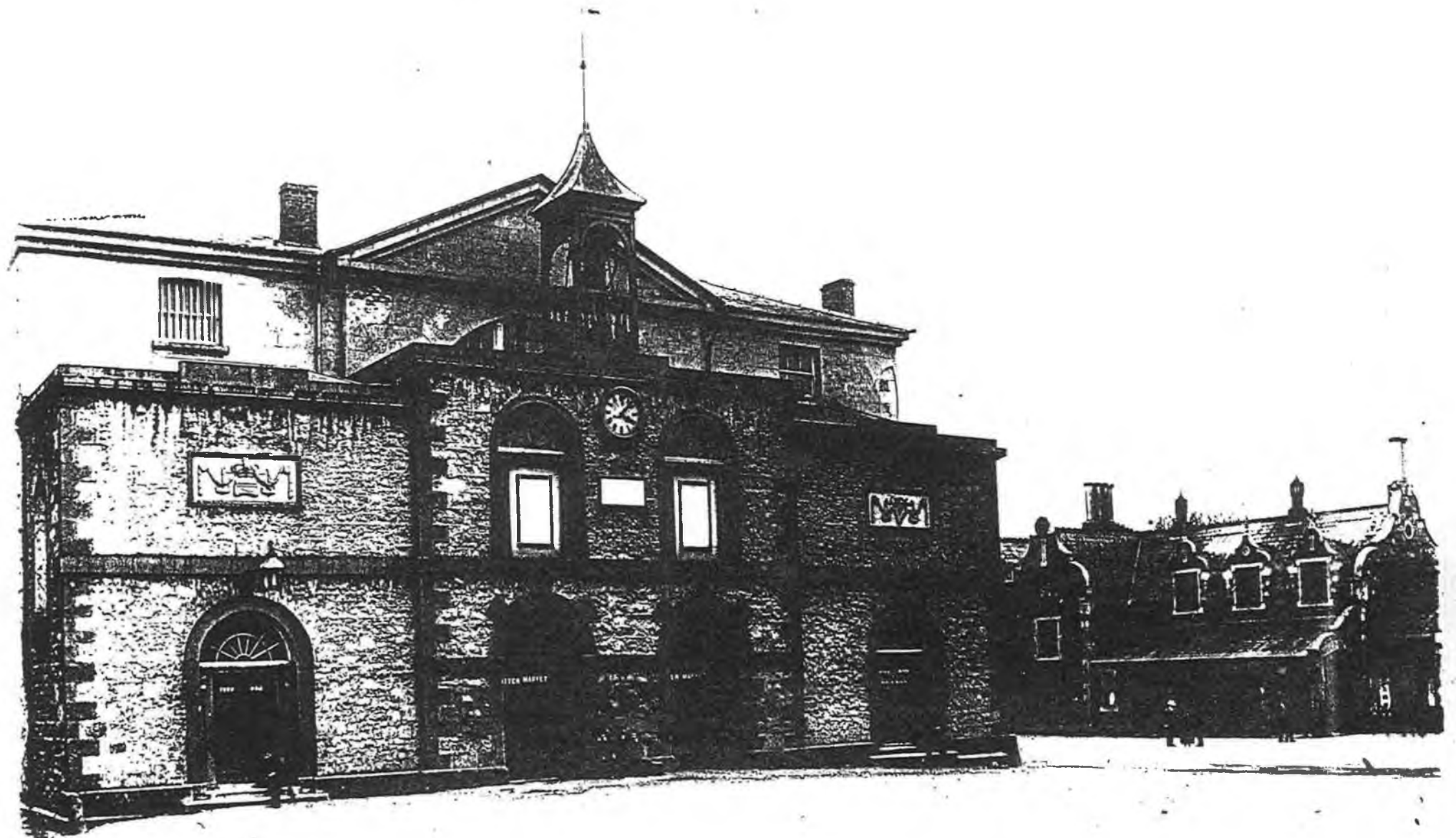




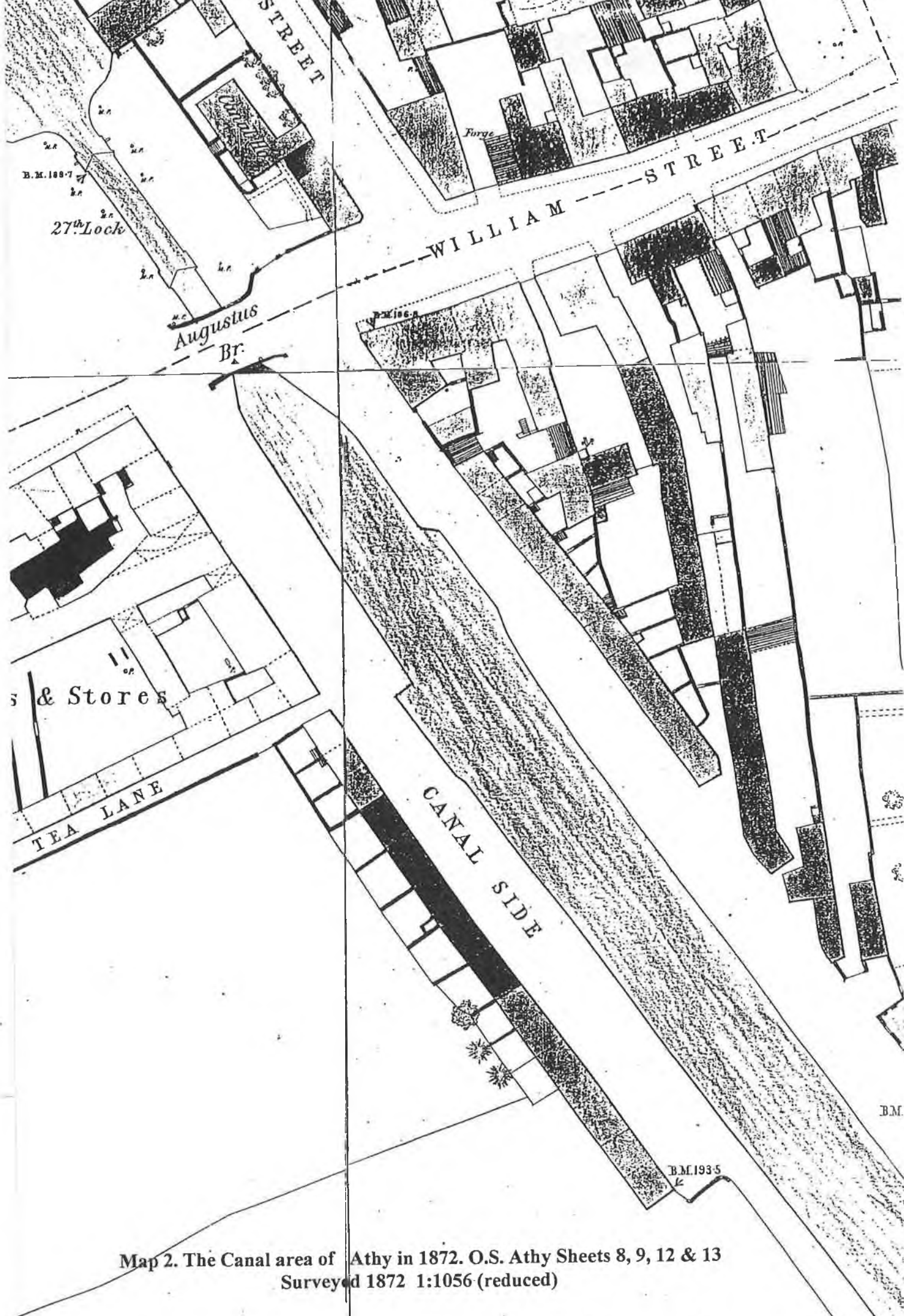




The home of George Minch at Ballygreany



Athy Town Hall c. 1900. Lawrence Collection, National Library



Map 2. The Canal area of Athy in 1872. O.S. Athy Sheets 8, 9, 12 & 13
Surveyed 1872 1:1056 (reduced)



The home of Matthew J.



Minch at Rockfield, Athy



THE BURNING OF THE LEINSTER LEASE AT A LAND LEAGUE MEETING IN KILDARE IN 1880
Illustrated London News 8 Jan 1881



Matthew J. Minch. *Leinster Leader* 22 April 1899

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5. NEWSPAPERS

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Minch family headstone inscriptions at the following cemeteries

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