



A Short History of First Larne Presbyterian Church

1715 - 1965

by

Rev Eric V Stewart

Preface

This little handbook is not intended to be a detailed account of the history of First Larne. Instead, it is a brief outline covering 250 years during which the congregation has existed. I am aware that brevity in such matters does little justice to our noble heritage, but by careful selection and by strict adherence to historical data, I have tried to present an accurate picture of the congregation's development. Comment and summary of the first century of the church's history are very brief because no congregational records are extant. Further, although I have heard many interesting anecdotes and stories about more recent ministers, I have been unable to include such due to lack of space.

Many times during research and writing, I was tempted to stop, but now that I have finished, I am pleased, not with the result, but with the rich rewards gained in the preparation. Indeed, when I look back over months of research and then look at this production, I feel somewhat amazed that it took so much time to produce so small a book. Nevertheless, it is my prayer that this booklet will be read by members and friends of First Larne for I believe the result of such reading must be a deeper sense of gratitude to Christ, the sole King and Head of the Church; a better realisation of the sacrifices and accomplishments of our spiritual forefathers, and a determination and willingness to make the future of First Larne even greater than the past.

The completion of this Outline is due in no small measure to earlier writers such as Pearson, Porter, Killen, Hamilton, Reid and Barkley. I have had to consult several works of general history and all available Synod, Presbytery and Congregational Minutes. In particular, I want here to record my gratitude to Mr John Gibbon BA whose research notes, comments and knowledge have been willingly shared with me; to Rev Prof J M Barkley MA, PhD, DD who has read the manuscript and has made necessary suggestions and corrections; to Mr H T Browne of Larne for access to copies of 19th century local newspapers; to Alderman Hugh McKay, of Larne, for use of historical material in his possession; to my colleague Rev W S W Poole BA, BD for his encouragement and assistance; to Mrs R Mark for helping to type the final manuscript, and to my wife who typed the research and manuscript notes.

I now offer this Outline History to you, my congregation, as a birthday gift on the occasion of our 250th birthday, with the hope that it will inspire each of us to a deeper loyalty to Christ and our church.

Eric V Stewart

An Introduction

The history of Presbyterianism in Ireland dates back to the Plantation in Ulster during the beginning of the 17th century. The Ulster of these bygone days was a land of swamps and forests and, where there had been signs of advancement, there had also been the ravages of war. Apart from a few fertile coastal areas such as the hinterland of Larne, and several fortified towns and castles, Ulster in the early 1600s offered little but hard work and a new beginning.

Because County Antrim was relatively close to the Scottish coast, it was natural that many of these early Lowland Scots should settle here - and of course there was the attraction of a fertile hinterland, a sparse population, and a safe harbour. A large number therefore settled in the Larne district and, from thence, spread out along the coast.

As well as bringing with them their distinctive traits of character these Scottish settlers brought the practices and customs of their Scottish Kirk, which was Presbyterian, and they regarded the Scottish Church as their mother Church. The only Protestant Church in Ulster during the early part of the 17th century was the Episcopal Church which until 1870 remained the Established Church in Ireland. It would therefore appear that if these early settlers in Larne took part in public worship it must have been in the local Episcopal Church, for the earliest record of a Presbyterian Church in or around Larne is that of Ballycarry in 1613. The attitude of the Episcopal Church towards Presbyterians in these years was one of tolerance. There was a willingness to allow Presbyterian clergymen to be attached to and to preach in the local Episcopal Church, on their acceptance 'of a peculiar form of ordination' or 'induction' in which the local Bishop joined as a Presbyter. What exactly happened on such occasions I don't know, but from 1603 to 1630 this practice prevailed. When writing of this period, in his book on the origins of Irish Presbyterianism, Professor A F Scott Pearson refers to it as "Prescopalian."

The first Presbyterian clergyman to reach Larne was the Rev George Dunbar, and like others he was attached to the local Episcopal church in the above manner. He was not recognised as a Non-Conformist minister, but was comprehended as being within the Established Church. His position was really that of belonging to the Presbyterian party in the Episcopal Church. In this unsatisfactory position he remained until the ecclesiastical reforms of Wentworth (later Earl of Strafford) and Archbishop Laud were applied and caused such oppression and persecution of the Presbyterian people in the Church that many had to flee.

It is in this historic context that the date which appears on the front wall of First Larne Presbyterian Church, 1627, derives its significance. I know that several explanations have been advanced, but to me the one that seems most likely is simply that it signifies the arrival of the Rev George Dunbar in the Larne district. Mr Dunbar had been ordained in Cumnock by the Presbytery of Edinburgh in 1599, but he was compelled to demit his charge owing to attempts to enforce Prelacy on Scottish Presbyterians. Attracted by the hope of religious freedom and by the fact that many Scottish settlers were coming, he sought refuge in Ulster.

His 'freedom' lasted for about 5 years, for in 1632 he was deposed for two years by Bishop Echlin, and although he remained in the district and was reinstated for a few months in 1634, he eventually had to return to Scotland, where he was installed as minister of Calder in 1638.

As mentioned above, 1627 seems to suggest the commencement of Mr Dunbar's ministry, but it should be remembered that although he was a Presbyterian, he preached in the local Episcopal Church. There was no separate Presbyterian congregation in Larne in 1627, nor indeed was there another Presbyterian minister until 1646, nor any Presbyterian Church until the erection of the 'Head of the Town' in 1668. It can be said that the roots of Presbyterianism represented by First Larne go back to 1627, and these roots were in no way broken when the original congregation divided with one part creating the congregation at the Bridge. Indeed, I believe that had this division not taken place, there would soon have been need for an additional congregation due to the increasing number of Presbyterians in the locality. It should be remembered that in 1965 Gardenmore congregation includes about 880 families, Craighill about 450 and First Larne about 960.

Chapter 1

The Origins of First Larne Congregation

The Rev George Dunbar left Ulster sometime between 1634 and early 1638. As I have said in the Introduction, he was understood as being a minister of the Presbyterian party within the Established Church, and all public worship was conducted in the local Episcopal church. Thus in these years there was no distinct Presbyterian Church or congregation, although it is quite feasible that during his periods of banishment he conducted Presbyterian services in his own home and in the homes of Presbyterian friends.

The next Presbyterian minister to come to Larne was the Rev Thomas Hall who ministered from 1646 to 1695, and during his ministry there was built the first Presbyterian Meeting House (circa 1668). Classon Porter's 'Congregational Memoirs' show that, although the situation for Presbyterians was anything but favourable, Mr Hall had a very successful ministry, and he was able to build up a solid, reliable congregation from amongst the Scottish settlers.

He was succeeded by the Rev William Ogilvie, who served the newly-formed congregation from 1700 to 1712. His period of service was also a difficult one for Presbyterians generally, for about the time of his ministry the first 'rumblings' of Non-Subscription were being heard. There is no historic evidence to suggest that such differences caused divisions in the Larne congregation, but I feel certain that it did little to strengthen the unity and harmony of any congregation.

For three years following Mr Ogilvie's death, the church at the "Head of the Town" had no minister, and this extended vacancy must by itself have caused unrest. Eventually when the majority of the congregation voted to call a Mr James Hood as minister, so strong was the division of opinion that practically a half of the congregation left. With the candidate of their choice, Mr Samuel Getty, they founded a new congregation and built their own church at the Bridge. The 'split' occurred in 1715, but the church itself wasn't erected until 1716.

Historical records of this period show that Presbytery - in order to preserve unity within the congregation - tried to introduce a third candidate, hoping that the members would unite for him.

The Synod also tried to restore harmony, but all attempts failed. The resultant division led to the formation of the congregation now known as First Larne. I have been unable to discover how many families were involved in this secession, and the only information available states that almost a half left the "Old Church." The Presbytery ordained Mr Samuel Getty on the 15th June 1715 and in the following year, on approximately the same site as that on which it stands today, they built their Meeting House. The fact that "almost a half" of the original congregation "moved house" in no way damaged or weakened their Presbyterian heritage, for they brought to their new place of abode the fine traditions of Scottish Presbyterian doctrine to which they adhere to this day.

The new congregation, that is, 'new' in the sense of occupying a new church, is now called First Larne. This name implies the historic fact that it is the oldest Larne congregation which is attached to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. This name or title of "First Larne" wasn't used till 1840 when the congregation, then attached to the Carrickfergus Presbytery, was included in the General Assembly which had been formed on the 10th July 1840. In earlier years the congregation had been known as Inver, then as Second Larne, later as Larne and Inver, and finally as First Larne. For the purpose of clarity, I will henceforth refer to the part of the original congregation that continued to worship at the "Head of the Town" as the "Old Church or congregation" and to the part that moved to the Bridge as First Larne.

Chapter 2

The Erection of the first Meeting House

The Meeting House was completed sometime in 1716, and the members must have worked hard and sacrificed much to erect it. An interesting anecdote recorded by Rev Classon Porter says that some of the Old congregation were so certain that the church would never be built that they remarked "They will have good spectacles who see that house built." It was built, and built in record time - and as a pleasant rebuke to those who expressed the doubt, the builders engraved a large pair of spectacles on a wall of the new building. Unfortunately, this 'historic spectacle' must have been removed during rebuilding or decoration.

The site of this first building was the same as that on which the present church stands or in close proximity to it. This brief outline prevents me giving historic details, but I believe that the First Larne site is the same, or in close proximity to, the site on which the ancient Priory of Inverbeg once stood. I am certain, however, that the original site was of much greater area than the present one. Larne in 1716 was little more than a single-street village with about 60 or 70 thatched houses, and there was no railway, no Station Road, no Circular Road. To substantiate my theory, a Committee Minute of 1825 refers to the planting of over 250 plants such as poplar, ash, beech and laurel in the Meetinghouse Green. The cost of these plants was £2 11s 0d.

Yet another 1825 Minute refers to the erection of a wall around the Green. The wall was 140 perches long (770 yards if an English perch; 980 if Irish), 18 inches broad and in height it varied from 8 feet to 4 feet to 1½ feet. The wall was built of stone, most of which was drawn by members of the congregation. The total cost of material and labour was £35, the stone-masons being paid a total of £8 15s 0d. For comparison, I asked a contractor to estimate the cost in 1965, and his figure was £2,000.

I mention these two matters to illustrate that our original site must have contained quite an area, and my chief regret is that we don't have it available now.

This original building remained until 1832, but I have been unable to discover detail concerning size and shape. I believe, however, that like other Presbyterian churches of this period, it was built in the shape of a Cross with the pulpit situated at the juncture of the two main beams. This design was widely used and was similar to that of the Old Church in Larne until it was rebuilt in 1829. There still exist several churches with the design of a mutilated Cross (First Broughshane, Cullybackey and Drumachose).

It is likely that the pews in our original building had doors, and this is also a Presbyterian feature which can still be seen in some older buildings. A further practice in this new congregation would have been the pew-rent system whereby members paid an annual stipend for the use of their pew or 'sitting.' In 1829 a Minute records that pew-rents were increased to 21/- for main floor and front seats in the gallery, and 18/- for other gallery pews. It will be of interest to note that an equivalent annual subscription in 1965 would be at least £20.

There is no record of gallery accommodation in the original building but if there was, the galleries must have been very small for it is reasonably certain that the walls, carrying a thatched roof, were just about 14 feet high. There is historic evidence that galleries existed in 1824, but I believe these were added some years after 1716. The thatched roof wasn't replaced with slates until the latter part of the century. The Old Church was slated when it was rebuilt in 1752, and I believe that First Larne must have received this 'modern' treatment some years afterwards.

Thus, the original building was anything but pretentious, yet it symbolised the immense determination, sacrifice and conviction of our Scottish forefathers. They were not wealthy people, but they loved their church and worked hard for the advancement and furtherance of their faith. When we remember that many of their accomplishments were attained in the midst of hardship, persecution and oppression, they offer an even stronger challenge to us today. From these simple beginnings, by the grace of God and the zeal of our Presbyterian ancestors, there has developed a strong congregation of almost 1,000 families.

Chapter 3

Rev Samuel Getty: 1715 - 1724

Mr Getty was ordained and installed as the minister of First Larne on June 15th 1715; his successful opponent for the vacancy in the Old congregation, Mr James Hood, had been ordained a few days earlier. It is impossible to give a detailed account of Mr Getty's ministry as there are no extant Minutes of this period. Like other ministers of this period, he was probably educated in Scotland, although I don't believe he himself was Scottish. The minutes of the Synod of Ulster state that he was licensed in 1711, and the Minute refers to him as a 'young' man. I mention this latter point because a writer in the Larne Weekly Reporter of January 1874 offers evidence which suggests that he must have been in early middle-age when he came to Larne. Where he got his evidence from I don't know, and I therefore accept the Synod Minute with its use of the word 'young' as meaning that he was between twenty-five and thirty-five when he was ordained in Larne.

The name "Getty" was well known at this period in the Larne area, and any reader who cares to visit the old churchyard will see evidence of this on several headstones. This evidence suggests that the name "Getty" existed in the Larne locality at least as far back as 1609, but there is no 'graveyard' evidence to prove that the Rev Samuel Getty was directly related to the local families of the same name. There are, however, several points which suggest that he may have been. For example, he was so strongly favoured by a large minority of the Old congregation that they left and built a church for him. Further, the name "Getty" was closely associated with the Old congregation until the 'split,' but after the formation of the new congregation it disappeared from the books of the Old Church. This suggests to me that the "Getty" families seceded and helped to build the new church at The Bridge, and although it is supposition, I believe there was a family link between the new minister and the local Getty families.

To continue the "Getty" context, many readers will be acquainted with the two mission halls built by John Getty, who died in 1874. These were built and endowed with his money about 1858. As well as this, he willed his entire estate to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. This John Getty was interred in the local Larne churchyard, and as suggested above, he may have been related to the Rev Samuel Getty. At the present time I have in my possession certain evidence which, although flimsy, suggests that the present Paul Getty, reputed to be the world's wealthiest man, is directly related to the aforementioned John Getty.

The only interesting point in Mr Getty's ministry that I have been able to uncover concerns some trouble which arose with the Old congregation. Classon Porter, in his Memoirs, records that the new congregation was being accused of encroachment by the Old Church, and on January 10th 1722 a Captain Agnew was appointed as a Presbytery Commissioner for the Old Church to complain to Presbytery about this matter and to ask Presbytery to establish parish boundaries. There is, however, another Minute, dated February 8th 1722, which suggests that many left the Old Church not because they were being proselytised, but because they were dissatisfied with their minister, Rev Josias Clugston. Anyway, on June 3rd 1722 Presbytery visited Larne to deal with this matter, but they took no action other than to "desire the Congregation of Inver (First Larne) to receive no more members from the Larne and Kilwaughter Church (Old Church) until bounds should be set." "Bounds" were never set, and it would appear that they weren't needed for shortly after this incident the congregations were living and working together in harmony even as they are today.

Rev Samuel Getty died on February 27th 1724, but I have not been able to ascertain his burial place, even as I have found no reference to his home or its situation. If he was buried in the Larne Churchyard his name appears on no headstone. Although there are no congregational records of Mr Getty's ministry, it appears to have been a very successful one, and the congregation seems to have increased and prospered.

Chapter 4

Rev William Thomson: 1726 - 1763

After Mr Getty's death in 1724, First Larne was without a minister for over two years. There are no records to suggest that the two years of vacancy were two years of disunity as to Mr Getty's successor, although the Non-Subscription controversy of 1719 to 1726 had thrown suspicion on many ministers, with the result that many Irish pulpits remained vacant for long periods because congregations couldn't agree in their choice of a minister. His name as minister of First Larne appears in the 1726 Synod Minutes and again in the Minutes of the recently formed Templepatrick Presbytery to which First Larne was then connected. However, in the list of congregations and ministers of the new Presbytery, dated 1725, Mr Thomson's name does not appear but the name of the church does. The fact that other congregations appeared with their minister's names on the list suggests that Mr Thomson wasn't ordained and installed until late 1725 or early 1726.

I have no evidence to offer as to Mr Thomson's native town or county, although I have been informed that he belonged to the Larne neighbourhood. His ministry took place during a somewhat troublesome time in Presbyterian history due to the Non-Subscription controversy and its after-effects. The Synod, in an endeavour to restore peace and unity to a divided church, formed into a separate Presbytery in 1726 those who refused to subscribe the Westminster Confession as the Confession of their faith. They called the new Presbytery the Presbytery of Antrim, and it originally contained sixteen ministers and congregations. Although this division occurred, it should be noted, as Prof J Barkley has pointed out in his "Short History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland," that for eighty years both groups remained good friends. Their students were educated at the same Colleges, and members of the Antrim Presbytery often attended Synod meetings. One of the original ministers of the Non-Subscribing Presbytery of Antrim was the Rev Josias Clugston, minister of the Old Church in Larne, but this in no way marred the friendship which then existed between the two churches.

It would appear from some evidence I have seen that Mr Thomson was a relatively wealthy man and that he owned some property in the Larne district, which latter point might suggest that he was a local. As far as his wealth was concerned, he was most fortunate, for at one stage his congregation owed him £142. Since his promised stipend would have been about £40 per year, the debt represents over 3 years' salary. Apparently Presbytery tried to improve this state of affairs but with only limited success. A 1759 Minute reads inter alia, "...this account was a matter of surprise to Presbytery that a congregation so numerous and wealthy as Larne should be under such a large arrear of stipend." The phrase "numerous and wealthy" is of interest, but I have been unable to ascertain just how "numerous" or how "wealthy" the congregation was.

Lack of historical material prevents me giving accurate facts about Mr Thomson's ministry, but his obituary in the Belfast News Letter of May 20th 1763 suggests that he was a very successful minister, and it reads, "Upon Friday last, died very suddenly, the Rev William Thomson, Dissenting Minister of Larne, greatly lamented by all his friends and acquaintances. He discharged his ministerial duties with diligence and fidelity, and upon all occasions maintained a conversation becoming a preacher of the Gospel. He was a man of sincere, unaffected piety, of extensive brotherly love, and of strict sobriety and very remarkable for simplicity of heart and that charity that thinketh no evil." Thus it would appear that, regardless of stipend arrears, minister and people lived and worked together in harmony.

Chapter 5

Rev Isaac Cowan: 1765 - 1787

When Mr Thomson died suddenly and unexpectedly his congregation still owed him a substantial sum of money, and tardiness in settling this matter explains, in part at least, why they were not allowed to call a minister for over two years. A Presbytery Minute of this period shows that the pulpit was supplied by licentiates who preached with a view to receiving a Call, and apart from owing money to Mr Thomson's

estate, the congregation did not reimburse the licentiates. Presbytery insisted that both these matters must be rectified before permission to issue a Call would be given.

There is no record to suggest that the congregation quarrelled over a successor to Mr Thomson, for as soon as they settled their financial matters they received permission to proceed, and in a very short time they issued a Call to Mr Isaac Cowan, the son of a County Antrim farmer. The Presbytery records show that Mr Cowan had been licensed by the Templepatrick Presbytery on April 24th 1764. In the context of this Call to Mr Cowan, I have discovered some guidance as to the numerical strength of First Larne, for it was signed by 357 members. If this number seems to be rather large, it should be remembered that it does not refer to communicant, FWO members as it would today, but to the heads of families, and so suggests that there were at least 357 families in connection with First Larne.

The Call was presented to Mr Cowan on December 23rd 1764 and as a result he was placed on trial for a number of months. Having been found satisfactory he was ordained and installed on August 4th 1765. His promised stipend was to be £40 per year, but again, the congregation was often in arrears. My only source of information about his ministry has been confined to Presbytery visitations, and several of these were devoted to Presbytery efforts to make the congregation pay their minister's stipend.

The first Presbytery visitation, held on July 25th 1769, was a most agreeable one, as indeed was the visitation held on February 17th 1774. The only issue that arose concerned a report from the minister that some of his congregation were not as regular or punctual at public worship as they should be, and that some had a habit of leaving the service before it was concluded.

This matter gave some concern at a further visitation of Presbytery in 1783. However, I don't believe that this peculiar habit of leaving before the service ended, or arriving after it had started, or indeed non-attendance, were at this time due to any fault either in the minister or congregation. Apparently a similar complaint was common throughout the Presbytery and it also appeared in the Non-Subscribing churches, for Classon Porter records that "the people could not be wiled back to the forsaken sanctuary, but by the prospect of hearing a politico-military discourse from such a text as 'teach the children of Israel the use of the bow'". I am inclined to assume that much of the explanation lies in the fact that many of the "hearers" were connected with the Irish Volunteers at this early period in the history of this organisation, and they may have had to fulfil duties in this connection. I have no records to show that Mr Cowan took an active part in the Irish Volunteers, but certainly his colleague, Rev Robert Sinclair, minister of the Old Church, took a very active leadership in the movement, and Classon Porter records that he was "a splendid soldier".

Mr Cowan died on March 2nd 1787. He was survived by a son and two daughters. His ministry appears to have been quiet but successful. I don't know where he was buried, and if it was in the local churchyard there is no headstone to mark his grave.

Chapter 6

Rev Robert Thompson: 1787 - 1814

Although I can't give actual dates for Mr Thompson's ordination, historical data does show that he was ordained in the same year as Mr Cowan died - namely, 1787. Not only is there an absence of congregational records, but from August 1784 to September 1789 there is an absence of Presbytery Minutes. His ordination service was held on the Meetinghouse Green where platforms and balconies were erected for the accommodation of the people. Such a custom as this was quite a common one, and, weather permitting, was practised in many churches throughout the country.

Like his predecessor, he ministered during stormy political times in Ireland. The latter part of the 18th century was a time of great unrest due to the harsh treatment of Roman Catholics under the Penal Code, and of Presbyterians under the Test Act. Although Ireland gained legislative independence in 1782, the Parliament was completely unrepresentative, and the Society of United Irishmen was formed to institute parliamentary reform. Professor Barkley makes the interesting point that it was about this period that the

connection between Presbyterianism and radicalism issued in the contemptuous epithet "Blackmouth." In his "Short History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland" he says "Blackmouth" was a term of political abuse, applicable to rebels or potential rebels against the State at a time when Church and State were closely linked and when in certain circles "Presbyterian" and "rebel" were regarded as synonymous terms. The epithet was first widely applied to Presbyterians in the day of the Volunteers and United Irishmen, and is a testimony to the radicalism of the Church and her desire for political democracy. The fairy-tale which suggests that the word "Blackmouth" was applied to our forefathers whose mouths were stained black through eating "blae-berries" when they were being hunted in the hills is thus exploded.

Mr Thompson, fourth minister of First Larne, was a United Irishman, as indeed was his colleague in the Old Church, the Rev James Worrall. Both men were so deeply involved in the activities of the United Irishmen that they were imprisoned in Carrickfergus Gaol. However, their imprisonment doesn't seem to have been very severe, and it didn't last for more than a week. In this they were fortunate, for two of their clerical brethren, Rev James Porter of Greyabbey, and Mr Archibald Warwick, a licentiate, were executed, and several others had to emigrate. It should be remembered, however, that although many ministers, elders and members of the Presbyterian Church participated in the Society of United Irishmen, the majority of the leaders of the Synod were opposed to rebellion, and wanted to see reform gained by constitutional means. Further, whenever the rebellion took a distinctively religious bias, most Presbyterians became disassociated from the organisation.

Nothing in the Minutes suggests that the congregation was anything but pleased with their minister's participation in the United Irishmen, and likewise there is nothing to suggest how the congregation progressed during his ministry. He died in 1814, at which time he was living in a house at the Curran.

Chapter 7

Rev James Cochrane: 1815 - 1824

After Mr Thompson's death, two licentiates preached on 'trial' in First Larne. One was Mr William Harrison and the other was a local man, Mr Samuel Eccles, whose descendants still live in Larne. Neither candidate was successful, but a number of members who were favourably disposed towards Mr Eccles left First Larne, and "on a certain Sunday they marched in a body" to the Upper House.

Classon Porter writes, "Here it was found necessary to build, for their special accommodation, an additional gallery, which, by most people, was cruelly called 'the Cochrane Gallery,' in honour of the gentleman from whose ministry its first occupants ran away. By others it was called 'the run-away gallery.'"

Mr James Cochrane, whom the congregation called, graduated from Glasgow University in 1818, and was licensed by the Belfast Presbytery in 1815. He was ordained and installed in First Larne on December 21st 1815 and thus began the most turbulent ministry in the proud history of our church. The fact that more members didn't "run away" during this ministry speaks highly for the congregation. I have no intention of giving a detailed account of the several 'incidents' in which Mr Cochrane became involved, but I will endeavour to present an outline, which I trust will be fair both to minister and congregation.

Before coming to Larne, it appears that Mr Cochrane was a tutor to a Carrickfergus family named Craig. He "married" a daughter of this family, and it was this so-called marriage which started his first trouble. On his own admission at Presbytery in May 1816, he apparently married this girl in a private ceremony in May 1815. He also admitted that the wedding was performed by himself, without witnesses and without public announcement. The net result of several Presbytery examinations of his case was that he was suspended from office until the Synod could be consulted.

I should mention here that whilst this Presbytery trial was taking place, Mr Cochrane was not entirely deserted by his congregation, for a **memorial** signed by about 200 members was presented on his behalf. Further, Presbyterian marriages were often questioned prior to 1844, and in that year were held to be

invalid unless both parties were Presbyterian.

When the Synod met in Belfast in June, this unfortunate matter occupied much of its time with the presentation of memorial, counter-memorials, propositions and amendments. Perhaps the most notable fact that emerged from the Synod trial was that a large section of his congregation wanted their minister reinstated, although an active minority felt that the congregation would be best served if Mr Cochrane resigned. The Synodical judgment was that he be suspended for one year.

During this year the congregation was without a minister, and the unrest was increased by the usual financial troubles and by the congregation's unwillingness to pay the weekly supply-fee. This source of trouble continued between Presbytery and congregation for about 7 years, but it was a little matter compared with what was to come. Whether or not Mr Cochrane was properly married, I have no way of knowing, but I assume that, since he was reinstated in 1817, he must have satisfied Synod and Presbytery as to the legality of his marriage. Two years later in August 1819, a Presbytery visitation found matters to be reasonably in order, and such seems to have been the case for a further 3 years.

In 1822 £10, which had been collected for the relief of poverty in the South and West, and which had been entrusted to the minister to forward to the Rev James Horner in Dublin, disappeared. According to Mr Horner it never reached him, although evidence was given by the Saintfield Postmaster that a letter addressed to Mr Horner had been handled by his office and had been noticed because of the peculiarity of the address - namely Rev James Horner, Mary's Abbey, Dublin. He was unable to state that it had been sent by Mr Cochrane. Scandal and gossip were rife through the community, and Presbytery was called in to assist in clarifying the matter.

The church committee, who were not without sympathy for their unfortunate and careless minister felt that, because the future worthwhileness of his ministry was questionable, it would serve both minister and congregation best if they separated. They promised that if he would resign they would not only pay him all stipend arrears but would also give him voluntary subscriptions.

Mr Cochrane was never proved guilty of theft in this matter, but because he was found guilty of folly and imprudence he was suspended for nine months. However, at a Presbytery meeting held on May 11th 1824 a further charge of appropriating £5, a donation to the London Missionary Society, was lodged against him and the judgment on this charge was guilt. He was therefore suspended sine die and, although he appealed to Synod, the Presbytery judgment was upheld and on Sunday July 4th 1824 the Rev W J Raphael, of Ballyeaston, declared the church vacant.

Through all his misfortunes and even after his guilt had been proven, an appreciable number of his congregation wanted him to remain. It may have been this fact that led him to imagine that he could cause a 'split,' for evidence suggests that he tried to do this but was baulked in the attempt. His only recourse was departure. The congregation provided the sum of £45 to pay for travelling expenses for his wife, family and himself, and the Rev William Glendy with Messrs Snoddy and Boyle accompanied the family to Belfast and saw them embarked on the ship Louisa for America. They sailed on Sunday 12th September 1824.

Chapter 8

Rev Joseph Shaw: 1825 - 1830

Mr Cochrane's ministry brought little credit either to himself or his congregation, and bears no comparison to the brief but brilliant ministry of the Rev Joseph Shaw. As a scholar, Mr Shaw must have been something of a genius, for the records show that he commenced his classical education at the age of seven, entered Glasgow University at the age of twelve and graduated at the age of seventeen. He was born on July 6th 1801 at Cairncastle where his father was a farmer, and at the age of twenty he was ordained and installed as minister of Portglenone. In 1825, at the age of 24, he was installed in First Larne after a trial period of four Sundays, and was promised £60 stipend.

At the time of his induction there were at least 250 seat-holders in the congregation, but, of course, the seat-holder may have been the head of quite a large family. The new minister was installed on January 4th, and a Minute records, inter alia, "...the Presbytery and a large party of friends partook of an excellent dinner prepared for the occasion by Mrs Sinnet at the Antrim Arms Inn." This Inn was situated at the corner of Cross and Dunluce Streets.

I should mention that the Congregational Minutes are extant from 1823, except for the period 1833 to April 1835, and thus it is possible to be more exact about congregational activities. Mr Shaw entered a somewhat unsettled congregation yet in his brief ministry he inspired greater advance and progression both in spiritual and material life than seems possible in such a short period. Not only was church property improved, and plans instigated for the erection of a new building, but the whole vision of the congregation was extended to include interest in Mission activities and social concern. As far as the congregation was concerned the Minutes prove that they responded to their young minister's lead, and from their accomplishments it is obvious that no sacrifice was considered too great for God and their Church.

His first major improvement, which was commenced a few months after his installation, was the erection of a very substantial wall around the Meetinghouse Green. In this job the congregation gave much voluntary help, and although I have referred to this wall in an earlier chapter, some further detail will be of interest. In all, there were 335 loads of material, and the workman who quarried the stones received 2½d per load. The quarry belonged to James McCartney. The lime was purchased from James McFerran, of Magheramorne at 1/- per barrel, and the sand was drawn, by voluntary help, from Sandy Bay by permission of Mr Henry Magee. After this immense structure was completed, the whole Green was re-laid and re-planted with various kinds of trees and shrubs. As previously mentioned, over 250 plants were used to do this job.

Having completed this work, the next problem dealt with was shortage of seating accommodation. A Minute of November 1825 states that all seats were rented, and it was impossible to seat new families. The two applicants for whom new seats were erected were Dr Smiley and Mr William Ferris. These two seats had to be placed in an aisle, and on Sacrament Sunday they had to be removed because of the old Presbyterian custom of serving communion with the participants seated at tables placed along the aisles.

An interesting sidelight in Mr Shaw's ministry was that the Old Church, during the rebuilding of their Meeting House and having been refused permission to worship in the Episcopal Church, applied to Mr Shaw for such permission, and was immediately accommodated. Indeed, they worshipped in First Larne from June 1828 to October 1829, and some years after this they were able to return a similar kindness.

Towards the end of Mr Shaw's ministry I find the first mention of rebuilding First Larne at an estimated cost of £750, but although he lived to see most of the money made available, he did not live to see the new building erected. I think that the need for rebuilding and arrears in stipend explained the fact that in 1829 the Committee decided to increase pew rents to 21/- except for gallery seats, which were raised to 18/-, omitting the front gallery seat which was raised to 21/-. In this matter the Session and Committee requested Mr Shaw to refuse church privileges to any who were in arrears with their stipend. A point of interest in this financial context is that the Stipend Collector was paid on a commission basis, and the Minutes show that in October 1829, a new collector, William Craig, Ballyrickard, was paid at the rate of 1/- per £1 of stipend collected. The sexton of this period was Mary Glasgow, and she was paid her rent of £2, plus a further 10/- per quarter, plus 4/- at each Sacrament.

As I have already mentioned, Mr Shaw instigated the rebuilding of the Church. The plan for this was drawn up by a Mr Neilson for the fee of £2 2s 0d and a special sub-committee were appointed in January 1830 to devise ways and means of raising the money. However, on April 12th the Committee, who had met to finalise some of the plans for rebuilding, decided to postpone continuance due to Mr Shaw's illness.

He died on August 13th 1831 at the age of 30. The following is an extract from a Minute recorded by the Committee Secretary, Robert Sloan: "This morning at 1:00 a.m. our much esteemed and deeply lamented Pastor, the Rev Joseph Shaw, departed this life in the thirtieth year of his age. As he lived the life of the

righteous so his latter end was like with theirs - calm, peaceful and resigned he yielded up his spirit into the hands of his Redeemer."

A further Minute of August 15th records: "The vast concourse of people of all religious persuasions who attended the funeral plainly evinced the esteem in which he was held while living and the genuine sorrow felt by his departure."

Thus ended the earthly life of one of the greatest of my predecessors.

Chapter 9

Rev Henry William Molyneaux: 1831 - 1871

Henry William Molyneaux, 7th minister of First Larne, was born in March 1806 near Dunadry, Co. Antrim. As his name suggests, his ancestors were French. He had a distinguished College career at the Old Belfast College (which preceded Queen's University) where he specialised in Philosophy, a subject in which he later became Synod Professor. He was licensed by the Presbytery of Templepatrick on November 2nd 1830 and was ordained in First Larne on June 9th 1831. Like many of the candidates in these early days, he had to preach on trial for at least four Sundays.

One of his tasks was to bring to fruition his predecessor's plans to rebuild the sanctuary. During the rebuilding the congregation were allowed to worship in the Old Church at 2:00 pm each Sunday. Unfortunately it is at this period that there appears a blank in our congregational Minutes, and I assume that this is explained in some way by the rebuilding and the movement from one Church to the other. The first secretary whose Minutes I have seen was Mr Robert Sloan, who seems to have held this office from May 1823 until January 1832. His successor as secretary was Mr Thomas Eccles, a name still known in Larne.

There is no record as to when this new building was completed and opened, but I have found evidence to prove that the congregation was able to return to it sometime during 1835. The building had two entrance doors facing Bridge Street, but a Minute dated November 1884 shows that these two doors were to be replaced by one main central door, and that the stonework, unfinished at the time of opening, was to be completed. This work was completed in July 1845 by Mr Alexander Owens of Point Street.



Very Rev Henry William Molyneaux, DD

1831 - 1871

The building itself was about 70 feet long and held about 730 people. I have some evidence to suggest that entrance to the galleries was provided by two exterior stone stairways.

It will interest readers to know something of the sacrifice made in the interests of their church by our ancestors. A subscription list of this period records that thirteen subscribers gave an average of £10 each, which in purchasing power would be equal to about £175 today. A congregational census of this period shows that there were 528 families, totalling 2,753 individuals in the congregation. Today we have about 960 families, which represent about 2,600 individuals.

The only form of praise used in the Presbyterian Church services of this period was psalmody. There were no musical instruments of any kind but this doesn't seem to have decreased the 'heartiness' of the praise, for a Presbytery visitation in August 1834 congratulated the precentor and congregation on their psalmody.

The finding at this same visitation records that the two congregational commissioners, Messrs James Palmer and John Smiley, reported that attendances were improving, Sunday School instruction was good, parents were attentive to their children's education, 300 communicants had attended the Sacrament, 15 new communicants had attended the last Sacrament, all scandalous and profane people were excluded from church privileges, and a seat at the back of the gallery was provided for the poor and paid for with £30 bequeathed by the late Rev Joseph Shaw. It was also reported at this visitation that James Patton had left £3 annually for distribution to the poor as long as the present monarch lived, and that there was no parish house or farm. I mention these findings to show that the congregation under Mr Molyneaux's leadership was steadily progressing.

To place the history of our church in context, I should mention that on Friday 10th July 1840 the Synod of Ulster and the Secession Synod united to form what is now called the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland - the first Moderator of which was the Rev Dr Hanna who had opened the new First Larne Church. In 1841 First Larne, as it then became known, was placed in the Carrickfergus Presbytery, in which Presbytery it remains to this day.

In 1841 the Old School House was built in the Meetinghouse Green, where it still stands. During the next few years nothing of great note seems to have taken place except the ever recurring issue of stipend-arrears, a complaint not in any way peculiar to First Larne. Again, to remind readers of the background of this church history, the years 1846-47 saw the effects of the Famine in which hundreds of thousands of Irish people died, and almost a million left the country.

The Carrickfergus Presbytery, the oldest in the Church, visited First Larne in 1848, and their finding shows that the congregation was continuing to prosper. The congregational commissioners reported that their minister "is a man of study, not unduly engaged in secular employments, but faithfully devoted to the duties of his office. He does not attend fairs or markets, to the disparagement of his ministerial character." This finding also shows that there were 560 families in the congregation, although 100 were not very active. The number of baptisms per year averaged about 100. An interesting comparison is that today with 960 families the number of baptisms seldom exceeds 50. Reference in the finding is made to a congregational Library and to the fact that there were four elders.

Mr Molyneaux, because of his scholarship and active participation in Synod and Assembly affairs, had become a well-known and much respected man throughout the Church. As a reward for his efforts, he was 'enthroned' as Moderator of the General Assembly in June 1852. At this time he received the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity from an American College. This degree reward is today usually given by our Presbyterian College in Belfast, but the Church had no such centre of theological training until 1853, and Queen's College, opened in 1849, had no theological faculty. I should mention here that Dr Molyneaux, like other Presbyterian ministers of the period, had been educated at the Belfast Academical College (Old Belfast College), but as a result of the Arian controversy the General Assembly in 1841 declared it unsatisfactory. This dissatisfaction ultimately led to the erection of Assembly's College.

Dr Molyneaux's work with his congregation is again obvious from the fact that in 1857 a manse was built in

the townland of Ballyloran, and the stone-laying ceremony on this occasion was performed by his close friend and noted church leader, Rev Dr Henry Cooke.

Also in this year the two Mission Halls were built, thanks to the generosity of Mr John Getty to whose generosity I have already paid tribute. For the following ten years the Minute Book shows little of interest except that in 1862 ten elders were appointed and ordained, and in 1866 Mr William Thompson, who had been the Precentor for many years, resigned, and great difficulty was experienced in replacing him.

In 1867 Dr Molyneaux's wife died, although there is no record of this in the Congregational Minutes, nor indeed is there mention of anything of historic interest until the Minute of February 5th, 1871, in which mention is made of the minister's illness. He died on August 23rd 1871 as he sat in his armchair in the parlour. He was survived by a son who was a solicitor in Australia, and a daughter, Mrs Fitzsimmons, in Belfast.

Thus ended the life of a great pastor and scholar.

Chapter 10

Rev James Brady Meek: 1872 - 1886

Readers will notice that the Rev J B Meek wasn't installed till some 11 months after Dr Molyneaux's death. The Minutes show that there was some division as to who should succeed as minister, and it would appear that there were at least nine candidates whose names were submitted to the congregation. Apart from this the period of the vacancy saw the resignation of Mr A Williams from his office of Clerk of Session, and on Thursday 15th February Mr William Patton was appointed to his office. The Patton name and its subsequent connection with the Rainey family of Larne are well known.



Rev James Brady Meek

1872 - 1888

The congregation finally agreed to extend a Call to the Rev James Brady Meek, minister of Parsonstown, in the Dublin Presbytery. Mr Meek, who accepted the Call, had been ordained in Parsonstown in 1869 and served there for three years. He was the first of the First Larne ministers to have been educated in Queen's College and Assembly's College. His installation was held on 9th July 1872 and the reception in the Town Hall is recorded in an interesting Minute: "The sumptuous dinner which was served up in good style did credit to Mr George Baine, who was caterer on the occasion. The effect of the floral decorations in the hall was still further enhanced by the presence of a number of fair faces, who occupied seats on the gallery." I assume that the ladies were now beginning to take a more active part in church work, or it might be more accurate to assume that now they were being allowed to take an active part!

Mr Meek's ministry was short, but appears to have been very successful. He was a popular preacher, and an extract from one of his sermons, which I have seen, suggests that he was a very direct and forthright

orator. Several Minutes suggest that both he and his Session were perturbed by the excessive drinking habits of some of the congregation, and it was quite a normal event for someone guilty of drunkenness to be brought before the Session and debarred from church privileges such as the Sacraments until he gave proof of repentance.

An interesting point in Mr Meek's ministry in connection with a series of special services which he held in November 1874 was the fact that hymns were used, and this is the first mention of hymns in church services that I have discovered. The hymns referred to were a collection known as "Bateman's Collection," and apparently these were used occasionally for about 6 months, but in April 1875, the Session stopped their use.

One of Mr Meek's first tasks in connection with congregational property was the removal of the large boundary wall to which I have already referred, and the erection of railings at an apparent cost of £60. This work was completed in 1875, and in the following year, due to the expansion of Ulster's railway system, 5 perches of our site were sold to the Ballymena and Larne Railway Company for £22. When the rest of the original Green was sold I don't know. Proof of the expansion of the congregation during Mr Meek's ministry is shown by the fact that the sanctuary was enlarged in 1878 to accommodate new families. The consultant architect, Mr S P Close, advised the extension of the East Wall by 10 feet, and this was done at a cost of £485 by a Mr John Beggs.

The narrow-gauge railway commenced operations about 1878, and apparently operated 7 days per week. The result appears to have been that the sound of the engines passing so close to the Church disturbed worship, and Mr Meek was asked by the Session to approach the Railway Manager about the matter. He must have been successful or else the congregation became used to the noise, for there is no further reference to the disturbance.

Another innovation in Mr Meek's ministry was the use of offertory-plates instead of the 'shafted soup-plate' models, which were then usual, two of which can still be seen at First Larne. The minister, who was something of a maestro at raising funds, seems to have had a successful idea in this innovation, and his offertory-plates were occasionally borrowed by other congregations. An 1881 Minute reads, "Ballycarry requested the use of the Collection Plates." I assume that these uncovered plates - the old type were partially covered - increased 'silent' offerings! Whenever Mr Meek resigned the church was completely free of debt and was in a prosperous condition.

During his ministry he kept proper financial statements and edited a congregational magazine, a few copies of which can still be seen.

In 1884, as a reward for his work, the congregation gave him a generous presentation. I quote some extracts from the Minutes of this happy occasion, which was held on December 3rd. "...the chair was occupied by our esteemed member, H H Smiley, Esq. J P Drumalis and Paisley, who came over specially from Paisley for this occasion...The address was read by Mr William Patton, and the presentation consisted of new Pulpit Gowns, Cassock, Bands and a handsome Pulpit Chair...Mrs Stewart Clark presented a beautifully bound Bible and Psalm Book." The address was signed by Margaret J Howden and Eliza Kerr Smiley. Another extract from a Minute of this function is interesting and reads, "...a number of young people under the leadership of Mr Nesbitt (schoolmaster) led the musical part of the programme. Mr Charles Howden (Jnr) presided at the harmonium." This is the first mention of a musical instrument being used in connection with a church activity, and considering the many controversies which arose around such issues as hymnody and musical instruments in the Presbyterian Church, I can only conclude that both minister and congregation were very progressive.

One point worth mentioning is that Mr Meek was actively identified with education, and did much for its advancement in the Larne community, as indeed he did for increasing an interest in poetry, a subject on which he often delivered lectures. In 1884 the "New National School" had been opened, and in August of that year the Olderfleet S. S. commenced and met each Sunday at 3:30 in this school, and in September of 1884 a Sunday School was opened in the Orange Hall. Both these Sunday Schools were under the care of the First Larne minister and Session, as was Millbrook Sunday School where the Superintendent was Mr

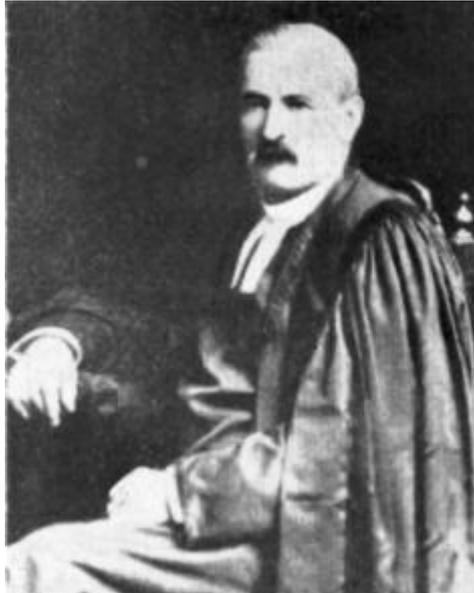
John Arnold.

In December 1886 Mr Meek resigned from First Larne on receiving a Call from New Parish, Rothesay, where he ministered most successfully until his death in October 1906. He was survived by his widow and five sons, and although I have heard of some of his relations I have been unable to contact any of them.

Chapter 11

Rev John Lyle Donaghy: 1887 - 1938

Many Larne people still remember Rev John Lyle Donaghy, and since my arrival in Larne I have heard numerous anecdotes about him. The amount of material - both historical and apocryphal - forces me to be very selective as far as this outline is concerned.



Rev John Lyle Donaghy
1887 - 1938

Mr Donaghy was born at Articlave, County Londonderry, in September 1862. He was educated at Coleraine Academical Institution, Magee University College and the Presbyterian College, London. In April 1885 he was licensed by the Coleraine Presbytery, and in July of the same year he was ordained as minister of Killymurriss. First Larne congregation, after a vacancy of about 11 months during which they considered quite a number of candidates, extended him a Call, and he was installed on the 5th April 1887.

During his ministry in Larne he took an active part in such matters as education, temperance, politics and the Orange and Black Orders. I have heard several people refer to his 'Orange' sermons, and in the words of one elderly parishioner. "He flayed our hide till it rose up in welts!" In educational matters he managed five schools which were under the care of the congregation. He was Chairman at the opening session of Larne Grammar School in 1888, and he was a member of Larne Regional Educational Board.

His congregational activities seem to have been fulfilled with the same zeal, and his work for the church generally might well have been rewarded with Moderatorship had he not asked for the withdrawal of his name from consideration. He served First Larne for 51 years, and this is the longest ministry in a long congregational history. One of his greatest problems within congregational life seems to have been that of finance, and many were the efforts he made to raise funds for ordinary church work, for rebuilding and repairs of day schools and church property.

Presbyterians have earned a name for being slow to receive innovation, and this is borne out in the case of

First Larne when in 1889 it was suggested that they should use a New Psalter which had recently been published. This seems to have been viewed with some suspicion, although it received a 'trial' which at the time it apparently lost, for nothing further is heard about it until 1894. Mr O'Brien, the Precentor of that period, was responsible for bringing the matter to a climax, and he pressed the Session to allow acceptance and use of the New Psalter. Hugh G Younge, the Session Clerk, recorded the following Minute: "After careful consideration the Session unanimously agreed to adopt the New Psalter, but recommended that it be done in a judicious manner."

Today we often hear complaints about Sabbath observance and poor attendances at public worship, and these are often described as evil symptoms peculiar to the second half of the 20th century. It will interest readers to know that such symptoms also existed at the end of the last century, and seems to have caused just as much concern as they do today. A Minute of May 24th 1897 reads "So many of our people have turned the Sabbath into a day of receiving and paying visits and going out of town by train and car...and conversation took place as to the best means of improving the attendance at the stated Sabbath services." The communicant membership of the church at this time was only 250, and the Presbytery finding made reference to this matter as indeed it also paid tribute to the "flourishing conditions" in the Sabbath Schools and Bible Class.

During Mr Donaghy's ministry quite a few alterations and improvements were completed to church property, including the church building and the manse. In April 1912 Mr James O'Brien, when presenting the Manse Building Fund Account at the congregational meeting, stated that a total of £1,349 had been subscribed and that a sum of £1,298 had been paid to Mr Allen McNeill, the contractor who built the Manse. When thanking the congregation for their kindness in providing a new manse, Mr Donaghy referred to it as "one of the best in the General Assembly."

It is interesting to note the steady advance in church membership, and although communicant-membership remained very low, yet the number of families connected with the congregation steadily increased. In April 1913 Mr Thomas Mayne (secretary), acting for Mr Alec Hamilton who was convener of the Pew-Letting Committee, reported that 49 families had joined the church during the year, and that the problem of accommodation was becoming acute. In this same year Miss O'Brien, presenting the Orphan Society Account, stated that their income was a record with the sum of £73 13s 2d. In 1964 this same account passed the £100 mark for the first time in our history.

The increase in the number of congregational families and the increase in church income seem to have inspired the Session and Committee to procure some assistance for their minister. In 1918 reference is made in the Session Minutes to the appointment of Miss McCalmont as a deaconess at the salary of £25 per year. Although she was appointed in September 1913, she wasn't ordained until November 4th 1917, and from all accounts was a most successful worker. In August 1914, the need for new elders was felt as the expanding congregation required more workers. I list the names of these men since the names will be familiar to some of the readers: James A Ligate, A B Holmes, Samuel McMeekin, William James Kennedy, Thomas Weatherup and James P Arnold.

In the year 1915, another familiar name appears in the Minutes of our congregation, and that is the name of Mr William Yeates. In March of this year the Precentor Mr Curran had resigned to accept an appointment in St Enoch's, and Mr Yeates, who was one of seven applicants, was appointed to succeed him on July 9th. As readers know, Mr Yeates is still Organist and Choirmaster in First Larne, which means that he has completed 50 years' service. During this half-century he has been missing from the organ no more than six Sundays. I can well believe that in the history of the church few, if any, have given such devoted and faithful service over such a period. I make no apology for including in this historical review the appreciation and gratitude of First Larne to a man whose loyalty to God and His Church is an example and challenge to all of us.

Much of the development in church music in our congregation is due to Mr Yeates, and the fact that an organ was introduced into First Larne without protracted disunity, as happened in many churches, was due to his influence. This also applied to the introduction of hymnody in October 1928, for this was a somewhat difficult introduction to effect in many churches. In my own lifetime I have heard the organ referred to as

the "devil's instrument," and hymns "the devil's music" and I know of three churches that 'split' because of these innovations.

Perhaps the largest piece of renovation during Mr Donaghy's ministry was that of the church, including the installation of a pipe-organ, the rebuilding of the pulpit, repainting, etc. The estimate which was accepted was for £5,095, but by the time the work was completed the total cost seems to have been nearer £7,000. The organ and the rebuilding of the pulpit were gifts from the Dowager Lady Smiley in memory of her late husband, Sir Hugh Smiley. The Smiley family had long associations with First Larne, and their generosity to charitable causes is still a by-word throughout the Province and especially in County Antrim.

The alterations to the church commenced in November 1926, and were completed in July 1927. During the alterations the congregation worshipped in Gardenmore Lecture Hall, and on returning to their own church they held special re-opening services on July 24th at which the special preacher was Rev Professor F Dave and the guest organist Mr J H McBratney; July 31st at which the preacher was the Rev Wylie Blue and the guest organist Dr F N Hay, and on August 7th at which the preacher was the Very Rev R K Hanna and the guest organist Captain C J Brennan.

It used to be the custom in Presbyterian Churches to use a common cup in the Sacrament, and this was the custom in First Larne until 1929, when in August of that year the Session accepted a gift of Communion vessels with individual cups from Mr J M O'Brien. One further innovation in Mr Donaghy's ministry which I would mention here was the introduction of the Freewill Offering system in 1925. This seems to have been an immediate success and, if my arithmetic is correct, in the first year of its use the Stipend was increased by £200. Not everyone joined the FWO system, and a substantial number continued to pay in the old system for some time. Nevertheless, the FWO system did much to remove the financial troubles of the congregation, and to provide the minister with a reasonable income.

The first mention of bowling in the congregation dates back to July 1936 when application was made and granted for the formation of a Bowling Club, which met in the Guild Room on Tuesday evenings throughout the winter.

In this same year, nine years after re-opening, the outside of the church was painted by Mr William Simms at a cost of £147 and, of this amount, £100 was given as a gift by Mr John Patton.

The following year, 1937, marked Mr Donaghy's 50 years as minister of the congregation. To celebrate the anniversary the congregation met on June 18th and at a social function presented Mr and Mrs Donaghy with valuable gifts. I quote here an extract from a newspaper account of that eventful evening: "With hearts full of gratitude to Almighty God for all His mercies, we, the members of First Larne Presbyterian Church, join in celebration of your Golden Jubilee in the pastoral oversight of this congregation...Now, with treasured recollections of 50 years' faithful service, we hope and pray that you may be spared to us for yet awhile, content in the knowledge that your people love you and value your work. Having profited by the vigour of your youth and our lives enhanced by the richness and experience of your maturity, we humbly pray that your desire to serve us will continue unabated."

In January of the following year yet another presentation took place to a man who had been a faithful friend to Mr Donaghy and the congregation and who had been Secretary for 30 years at that time, Mr Thomas Mayne, JP. Much of the information I have been able to use in the past 30-year period was written by him in his capacity as Secretary.

The success of Mr Donaghy's long ministry was testified to by the fact that even after 50 years his people still wanted him to remain - but it wasn't to be, for on the 17th October 1938 he died after a short illness. In paying tribute to him the Moderator, the Rt Rev Dr W J Currie, said, "The visible results of his work were imposing, but its invisible results eternity alone would reveal. And now his work on earth was finished. His last sermon had been preached - preached with all his characteristic vivacity and lucidity. He who had won in a unique degree the respect and esteem of his own congregation, and of all who enjoyed the privilege of knowing him by his consecrated zeal, his sympathetic nature and his broad, bright outlook upon life, had suddenly been summoned home."

Thus ended the life and ministry of a faithful pastor, a loyal friend and a fine Christian.

Chapter 12

Rev William John McGeagh: 1939 - 1963

The vacancy following Mr Donaghy's death was short and without dissension, for the hearing-committee, after hearing twelve men, unanimously recommended the name of Rev W J McGeagh, minister of First Ballymacarrett, Belfast. This recommendation was unanimously accepted by the congregation, and Mr McGeagh was installed on March 28th 1939 just a few months before the outbreak of war; a war which added greatly to his duties.

Mr McGeagh was a native of Draperstown, County Londonderry, and was educated at Coleraine Academical Institution, Magee University College, Trinity College, Dublin and Assembly's College. He had been ordained in Brookside Presbyterian Church, Ahoghill, in 1917; in 1920 he was called to First and Second Moneymore, which were united under his ministry, and in 1926 he was called to the large city congregation of First Ballymacarrett in which he ministered for 18 years. Words used by the new minister in his installation address in First Larne were soon to become more meaningful than perhaps he at the time imagined, for soon after his installation the nation was brought to the edge of defeat. "These are difficult days for the Church of God not only in this land, but indeed all over the world. The things for which the Church stands are being challenged - the crown rights of the Redeemer, the Sovereignty of God."

With the outbreak of war Mr McGeagh was appointed Naval Chaplain in charge of both Larne and Stranraer, and indeed he was Chaplain to the army as well. Much of his wartime ministry was spent attending to torpedoed and injured seamen who were brought in from the Western Approaches. It was his task to cater for the general welfare of these people as long as they were in the Larne vicinity, and this sometimes involved 24 hours per day. His dedication to this great work is still referred to with much admiration. The work of the chaplaincy was continued by him when he was appointed Chaplain to the local hospitals. He held this post until his retirement in 1963.

In his first committee meeting the new minister instigated the creation of a new entrance to the sanctuary from Point Street and adjoining the gable of Murray's House, and this work was completed soon afterwards.



Rev William John McGeagh

1939 - 1963

On September 17th of that same year, 1939, fifteen new elders were ordained by a Presbytery commission, which included Revs J T Doherty, J Armstrong, David H Hanson and Samuel Gilmore. The elders ordained were Messrs William Armstrong, Thomas Blair, John Campbell, Nathaniel Carmichael, James Alexander Caskey, Isaac Graham, John Gribbon, William Robert Gregg, Thomas Gregg, Robert McCluggage, Edward McCluggage, John McCormick, James Millar, James M O'Brien, Alexander Stewart Patton, and John Love, who was installed as an elder in First Larne and who had come from Second Keady. Of these six are still members of First Larne Session.

In a Minute dated October 16th 1939 I have found the first reference to the intended building of a new hall, but the Chairman advised that because of the war and the scarcity of materials this project should be deferred, and that in the meantime they should gather funds so that when a favourable opportunity arrived they could proceed without delay. Again, this matter was mentioned in April 1940 when it was suggested that such a hall would be a worthy memorial to the late Rev J L Donaghy, but because of the war such a memorial could be delayed for many years, and instead it was decided to erect a Memorial Tablet and give a Communion Table and Chair. This involved some alteration at the front of the church and loss of seating accommodation. The work was done by Messrs Ferris Ltd, and on 5th January 1941 Mrs Donaghy unveiled the Memorial and Mr James O'Brien, Convener of the Memorial Fund, read the Memorial Statement.

During the war years work in the church seems to have advanced, and included the building of an annex to the Guild Room in January 1948 and the ordination of new elders on 17th December 1944. The ministers taking part in the service were Revs H H McClure, John Armstrong, R H Galbraith, J T Doherty and W J McGeagh. The names of the new elders were Robert Blair, Thomas A King, William Lilley, Samuel J McMahon, James B McNeill and Samuel Snoddy.

During Mr McGeagh's ministry the church received quite a number of gifts, and I will mention some of historic interest. On 8th April 1948 the flag of the 2nd Larne Battalion UVF was handed over to the congregation by Brigadier General R C A McCalmont, and this is the flag which now hangs in the sanctuary. On 11th July 1914 at Drumalis the late Lord Carson received from the hands of the late Dowager Lady Smiley colours for the 2nd Battalion Central Antrim Regiment of the UVF. They were brought to First Larne at the request of Mrs Elgar, the late Lady Smiley's daughter. Then in November 1949 Mrs McKeown presented the church with a Reading Desk and Bible as a memorial to her husband, Captain J B McKeown, who for many years had been a member of the church committee.

Another memorial was erected in the church by the congregation itself, in memory of those members of the congregation who gave their lives during the war. This was unveiled by Dr H E Rutherford on 9th November 1952.

In a previous chapter I made mention of the 50 years' service given by Mr William Yeates, and during Mr McGeagh's ministry a further 50 years of service was marked by a presentation to Mr Thomas Mayne, who for 50 years had been congregational secretary. This took place in January 1954, and was a well-deserved tribute to a faithful congregational servant.

Not so pleasant, however, was the sea disaster of the previous winter, which brought sorrow to so many church families. Many First Larne people were bereaved by the Princess Victoria disaster, and in some ways this was the most difficult and sorrowful event of Mr McGeagh's ministry.

However, the work of the congregation advanced. The number of communicants had greatly increased, and financially the church was stronger than at any time in its long history. In September, 1954, the following members were ordained as elders: Messrs James P Arnold, George C Culbert, Archibald Duffin, William Rea, Douglas W Ross and Joseph Wallace, all of whom continue as active members of Session. Prior to this ordination, Mr McGeagh had had a very serious operation, but was able to take part in the Ordination Service.

First Larne during the previous 50 years had always been short of accommodation for its organisations, but before his retirement Mr McGeagh was able to see this problem partly solved by the purchase, renovation

and opening of what had been the Parochial School in Victoria Road. Much of the work of renovation was done by voluntary labour, and remains as a testimony to the loyalty and willingness of First Larne members.

The new hall was opened in December 1962 by Mrs T Kirk, Mr McGeagh's daughter, and was named "The McGeagh Hall" as a tribute to the man who for 23 years had been pastor and friend to the people of First Larne. The approximate cost of the renovated building was £7,000.

Mr McGeagh retired at the end of March 1963 after a ministry of 24 years, and on 16th May the congregation, through Mr John Campbell OBE and Mr Alex Hamilton MBE, gave him a valuable presentation and paid warm tribute to his work in the congregation.

The Way Ahead

There is but one way for us to go, and that is forward. The past, noble and great as it has been, is a starting point and not a dwelling place. Through persecution and hardship, through oppression and disappointment, God and our forefathers have brought us to this place, not that we may fritter away their accomplishments, but that we may be the better prepared to go forward with God to make the future even greater than the past.

'The Way Ahead' for us and indeed for every Church of Christ, leads beyond Larne to the uttermost parts of the earth; beyond Irish Problems to World Problems of hunger, war, apartheid and materialism; beyond parochial and denominational indulgences to worldwide horizons; beyond respectable religion to the 'foolishness' of the Gospel; beyond religious jargon to involvement with human need; beyond denominational-made deities to the Sovereign God of the Universe; beyond fear-inspired withdrawal from others to courageous advance amongst others ; beyond timid suggestion to bold endeavour; beyond religions caricatures to the Eternal realities of Christ – this is 'The Way Ahead' and there is none other.

It is my prayer that springing forth from these anniversary services and celebrations, there will arise a greater and more dedicated people of God who, fearing little the judgments of men, will march forward "like a mighty army" with the great triumphant Christ into the place of needy, suffering and divided humanity. It is my hope that arising out of this time of Thanksgiving there will be seen emerging the great New Testament concepts of the purpose of the Church; the relevance of the Faith to everyday life, and the willingness to sacrifice and work for the advancement and extension of Christian principles in this community and throughout the world – this is 'The Way Ahead' and there is none other.

Then let us go forward together beneath the banner of Christ. Let us build today such a heritage that looking back our children and our children's children will be forced to say: "This was their finest hour." Let us be determined that the torch of truth entrusted to us by Christ and handed on to us by our forefathers will blaze forth as never before, and will never die as long as First Larne exists. This is "The Way Ahead" - there is none other.

Eric V Stewart