

The Widow Dixon

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Mrs Dixon's Barn is part of Enniskerry lore. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Roman Catholic community used the barn as a place of worship, until the coming of age of the 7th Viscount Powerscourt, who granted land to build a new church at Knocksink Bridge, which was completed in 1861. That the image of the barn and the name Dixon continues to resonate locally a century and a half later says much about its symbolism; which is a kind of confusing blend of penal laws and English rule and the rule of the minority religion.

In this essay, I have used the Guardian Minute books of the Powerscourt Estate to piece together the life of Widow Dixon during the period 1847 – 1857. The estate was in guardianship following the premature death of Richard, 6th Viscount Powerscourt, in 1844. Since his son, Mervyn, was only eight, the estate was run by three Guardians until 1857, when Mervyn came of age. The Guardians were Richard's wife, Elizabeth Frances Jocelyn, her father Robert Jocelyn, the 3rd Earl Roden, and Revd William Wingfield, Richard's cousin. Day to day management of the estates (in Wicklow, Wexford and Tyrone) was conducted by Captain Cranfield, the Estate Agent.

This was the second minority of the century. The 5th Viscount also died young, also leaving his son aged just eight. Very few records exist from that period. In contrast, and perhaps because of the paucity of accountability in the first minority, the minority of the 7th Viscount is meticulously recorded, and the centrepiece of all these records is the minute books of the Guardians, which noted anything to do with house and estate management. There are five minute books in all, but unfortunately the first one is lost.

Of course the first question regarding Mrs Dixon—or Widow Dixon as she was known—is who was Mr Dixon? The earliest relevant record I can find is a rental of 1814, for William Dixon, who paid £17 rent for land in Enniskerry. As we will see below, this is the year Mrs Dixon was widowed. Whether William was Margaret's

husband or not is difficult to say, but given the location, there is little doubt they were related. According to the Griffith Valuations, Dixon held two pieces of land. The first was in Monastery townland, and consisted of the house at Glenbrook (opposite the Bog Meadow entrance) including lands bordered by the river bank and the Monastery road. The second was a marshy plot at Knocksink.

The first reference to Margaret in the Minute Books relates to a request for rent reduction, submitted in 1844. This was similar to many requests at the time, perhaps prompted by the death of Lord Powerscourt a year earlier. There appears to have been great disparity in rents across the estate, and the Guardians went to great lengths to try to establish a uniform rental rate. To achieve this, they conducted several surveys, culminating in the impressive and beautifully recorded Brassington and Gale Survey, which became their benchmark for rental agreements. Margaret Dixon is included in the Brassington and Gale book, listed as a tenant in Monastery. Dixon's request, submitted in 1844, but only noted in 1848 was:

Requests reduction in rent at Monastery Farm No 20. Hampton Valuation £47-12-2, £2-11-10 per acre; Brassington and Gale is £3 3s per acre, £20 value of building pa annual total £77 17s 2d. Farm is in lease. [Minute No. 189, 27th December 1844]

The response was:

Farm is in lease for lifetime of W Buckley aged 36 which makes a great difficulty for the Guardians but it appears that on the surrender of the lease it would be e— to reduce the rent to Brassington's valuation.

This note tells us that was Dixon paying above the Brassington and Gale Valuation (which itself was higher than another valuation conducted by Hampton), and that she was sub-letting the farm from W Buckley. This was common practice at the time, where middle-men often made more profit from land than landowners themselves. It is something that the Guardians worked hard to eradicate over the period of the minority, with some success. Soon after this note in 1848, a second minute is logged.

Formerly paid her rent regularly but – the business has declined for some years; – her lodging house not occupied as formerly; – her rent is very high. Other public houses established in Enniskerry contrary to a promise made to her – the land is difficult for cultivation – outlay on house is £500. Impossible for her to hold the tenement any longer – Requests Lord Roden to sanction her application

to the Court of Chancery to be released from the arrear now due by her on her surrender of the lease of lands of Monastery, and to be allowed some reasonable pecuniary assistance such as the circumstances of her case may justify (see No 189) [Minute No. 239, 8th February, 1848]

Margaret Dixon therefore ran a lodging house, which must have been licensed, and it would appear that this pre-dates some other licensed premises in the village—most logically the Leicester Arms (Prossers). There was a row in the early 1850s between the Guardians and Lord Monck of Charleville about whether a new public licence should be granted, and a minute in relation to this states that there were 56 houses in the village and already four public houses – “one Public House for every fourteen houses” (Minute No. 751). (The focus of the row was not that an additional public house was needed, but that the Roman Catholics wanted one “for themselves”).

The response to this request for financial assistance is unfortunately almost impossible to read, but from the context, and what appears later, it appears that reductions in rent were agreed to, in line with Brassington and Gale, along with some allowance in arrears. Despite offering to surrender lands, Mrs Dixon must have been allowed to stay, for a further minute in 1850 states:

The offices attached to her house and lodging house in Monastery are in a ruinous state. Requests the assistance of timber and slates to repair them. [Minute No. 495, 10th October 1850]

Requests of this nature were common, and the Guardians generally agreed to them as it was good estate management. Captain Cranfield was instructed to allow wood from the estate, sufficient for the repairs, to be provided to Mrs Dixon. There is no mention in the response about slate.

By 1852, things were becoming more desperate for Mrs Dixon. A minute in June 1852 records a plea by her:

Has been a widow for the last 38 years. Resident on the estate for upwards of 50 years. Paid her rent regularly till the bad times commenced. In 1848 a considerable amount of arrears were extinguished. A sum of £75 was left, and subsequently paid by her. In consequence of this and of losses in crops a large amount of rent is now due. The publick business of her house injured by the new

road. Will pay £83 if all arrears are forgiven and ejectment proceedings stopped. To raise this sum will sell her stock and all available property. Will pay her rent punctually for the future one half year within another. [Minute No. 793, 15th June 1852]

This tragic minute links several pieces of information together. It shows that the early rent record of William Dixon, 1814, was the year Mrs Dixon became a widow. It confirms that there was some monetary assistance provided in her appeal of 1848. It also states that the new road (most likely the new Bray Road) had split her property and damaged her business. There were several appeals to the Guardians for compensation in regard to the damage the new road caused to their property. In reading the response—which is heartless—it is probably necessary to remember that the Guardians were legally bound by the Court of Chancery who appointed them to do whatever was best for the maintenance of the estate:

There is a large amount of arrears due, and even if it were not, there is no prospect of Mrs Dixon being able to pay the rent from the very bad state of the lands, and the apparent want of industry on the part of her son. There would be no use therefore in leaving the Farm with the present occupiers, and Lord Powerscourt's Guardians must take the necessary steps for recovery (William Wingfield).

Mrs Dixon replied with a further plea directly to Colonel Wingfield, a relative of William:

Requests his interference with the Guardians. Her late husband's payments were good and his rents high. Until the road was changed, she paid her rents regularly. Is now at the mercy of the Guardians. The arrears are £200 out of which £50 has been paid. If this sum is allowed on the Monastery Farm, it will leave £80 which she would be able to pay in three separate instalments. The holding in Knocksink she would assign. Is 72 years old and a widow 36 years. The time for redemption ceases on Saturday. [Minute No. 874, 27 January 1853]

Colonel Wingfield forwarded the letter to the Guardians and enclosed a note “recommending Mrs Dixon as honest and industrious”. Mrs Dixon again requested of the Guardians on 1 February:

... to give her time and she will pay arrears and rent of the place she lives in. Has paid 5 Guineas per acre. Requests the Guardians, in her old age, to let

her have the house she lives in, with the garden attached and the small field by the river side, at a small rent, for her future subsistence. (The field contains 2 acres, 2 roods and 14 perches). [Minute No. 874 continued, 7th February 1853]

The Guardians finally responded:

I think that this old tenant now e— [unreadable] and who formerly paid a high rent should have her house and garden and a small field for her life for three years again, having been ejected from her Farms and the new Road having injured her.

Success for Mrs Dixon! In the immediate aftermath, the battle for who would take the remainder of her lease-holding began. The farms held by her contained just over 18 acres, valued at over £37 rent. Following her appeal, she was left a house, garden and a small field and the remaining 14 acres was to be let. The holding contained a second “very good house” but which needed a new roof. It was proposed that a stable and coach house should be added (these repairs later quoted by the Bray builder E O’Kelly, responsible for much of Enniskerry’s ‘Alpine’ look, to be £108 for alterations and £30 for ornamental work, which were agreed to by Louch, the estate architect – Minute No. 916). Given Mrs Dixon’s new rent would be £3, the second house would be let for £30, and the remaining land £23, Captain Cranfield estimated that the new rent achievable for this holding would be over £56, an increase on what was obtained before of £19, which would cover costs of construction and repair. No fewer than six tenants were interested in acquiring the land, including William Williams, whose mill across the river was falling into serious disrepair. W Wilkinson was accepted as tenant for the house, garden and small paddock; W Hillman was the tenant for the farm. In what must have been a separate plot, John Philpott proposed to pay £2 per acre for the land formerly occupied by Mrs Dixon, consisting of over “2 acres of arable land and 2 acres of moory land extending from the New Bridge to the Wooden Bridge”. The Guardians accepted, with the exception of land along the river bank, which they wished to keep for plantation (trees) (Minute No. 882). The final note in this regard relates to the amount of arrears to be struck off for Mrs Dixon: over £48 for her Knocksink Farm and over £104 for her Monastery Farm. The Guardians agreed to write them off (Minute No. 883, 7th March 1853).

Mrs Dixon settled quickly into her new living arrangements, and made requests on 1 June 1853 for “a few poles to divide her little Paddock”, and on 9 December 1853 for “8 joists 14 feet long to put a loft over her stable”, both of which were agreed to [Minutes 926, 986]. A request on 16 October 1855 that her house may be repaired, as:

She wishes to give up her licence and let part of her house to respectable people. Is too old to attend a Public House [Minute No. 1212, 16th October 1855].

The request was declined. She tried again in 17 November, stating that Lady Londonderry (Viscount Powerscourt’s mother, who had remarried) “promised to make her comfortable”. The curt response was: “will do nothing” [Minute No. 1354].

By 1857, there were no more references to Widow Dixon, She would have been over 75 years old at this time. Several questions remain for me. When did she die? Where did her son go? Where was her barn? And why, more than 150 years later, do we still remember her?

Michael Seery is a local historian. The Minute Books of the Guardians of the 7th Viscount Powerscourt are available to view in the National Library of Ireland.

POSTSCRIPT

My thanks to Úna Wogan and Judy Cameron for providing more information on this intriguing lady after this article was first published online. Úna writes that a letter to the Freeman's Journal on 26th Jan 1872 from Fr. Thomas O'Dwyer notified readers that Mrs. Dixon had died on the 25th January. The priest added that "it is well known to the Catholic public that the late Mrs Dixon gratuitously supplied her “barn” at Enniskerry for the Holy Sacrifice of the mass...” Judy writes that there is evidence to suggest that the "barn" was in fact attached to Mrs Dixon's house and that "she made an opening in her parlour wall, from which the gentry were invited to view the mass. A later visitor describes how the opening was closed up when the new church was built, and the barn became redundant." Finally, thanks to my father, Donal Seery, for reminding me that the well near what was Mrs Dixon's house is still known locally as Dixon's Well.