

Arson in Lorrha Parish Chapel

by Seamus J. King

There was a most unusual report in the *Nenagh Guardian* on 29 May 1878: 'An attempt was made on Saturday night to burn the Roman Catholic Chapel¹ of Lorrha. The fire originated in the harmonium gallery and caused much damage to that portion of the building before it was discovered. The gallery subsequently gave way and the harmonium was precipitated into the nave.' The report went on to state 'that the sale of some church pews² recently had been the cause of this diabolical outrage. A mission was about to be opened in the chapel next Sunday and it is presumed the incendiary took advantage of the proceeding on the part of the parish pastor. The outrage has caused the wildest sensation throughout the entire district. This is the second attempt of a similar nature.'

It transpired that the arson attack had nothing to do with a allocation of pews in the chapter. Later in the report it was stated that 'A man named William Haugh, being arrested on suspicion, was brought on Sunday before John O'Meara, Esq, J.P., Somerset House, James Mara and Mary Mara having lodged information to the effect that he expressed himself, saying that the organ loft would be all destroyed before the mission would take place. Haugh was sent to Nenagh gaol on remand till Lorrha Petty Sessions, which will take place to-morrow, Thursday.' The report concludes that 'A meeting of the parishioners was held on Sunday, when a subscription was entered into for the purpose of purchasing a new harmonium, and repairing the damage done to the chapel. A large sum was subscribed.'

The *Nenagh Guardian* reported on the meeting of Lorrha Petty Sessions the following week.³ The Petty Sessions was held the previous Thursday before T. B. Stoney, John O'Meara and Edward Murphy, Esqs. assisted by Major Percy, R.M. There were many witnesses to be examined and this may have been due to a reward of £50 which was offered by Rev. Mr. Meagher, P.P.⁴ 'for any information that would lead to the arrest and conviction of the offender.' There were so many witnesses that the Sessions had to be adjourned until 10 o'clock Friday. 'The result was the committal of an aged woman, named Anne Hough, for trail to the Assizes as the incendiary, and William Haugh,⁵ though sent back to jail, will, it is said, avoid being put on trial.'

The next issue of the paper set out to assign the motive for the burning.⁶ It was that Pat Hough, son of Anne Hough, the prisoner, had been teacher at the Lorrha National School. The previous year he had been dismissed by the patron, the Rev. J. Meagher, 'of course, not without cause, and another teacher, Riordan, appointed in his place.' This led to bad

feeling, especially on the part of the old woman, 'as she felt very much mortified on account of the removal of her son and his being replaced by another, Riordan.'

Riordan had been threatened two or three times, that if he did not give up the school and leave the place, 'he would have occasion to be sorry for it.' The new schoolmaster treated the threats with contempt, and thus matters progressed for some time. The old woman 'nursed her ire to keep it warm' and it was alleged that she openly said she would have revenge one way or another. The report continued that a new harmonium had been purchased and placed in the new gallery of the chapel by Fr. Meagher in the meantime, and the building had undergone thorough repair and improvement. In November the previous year an attempt was made to burn the chapel. 'Of course no one was suspected⁷ but those who might have a motive for the deed. It's being an accident was out of the question. The affair was wrapped up in mystery and the police could take no action in it. Matters thus remained for six or seven months until May 1878.'

In the meantime Anne Hough's son got an appointment in the National School at Laurenstown, Co. Galway through the influence of Fr. Meagher, which showed a certain kindness and humaneness in the man. In fact it was said that Laurenstown was a better paying school than Lorrha. It was also stated that the job was 'more suitable for Pat Hough's capacity as a teacher.' It was hoped that the bad feeling generated by Hough's displacement in Lorrha would subside, but the burning on the night of 25/26 May proved to the contrary.

Also the mission went ahead in the chapel on the Sunday after the burning under the guidance of Fr. Harbison of the Redemptorist Order, who preached the opening sermon.

As well we were informed that 'A presentiment will be applied for under the malicious Injuries Act for an amount to cover the damages caused by the burning.'

Reason for Teacher's Dismissal

In all of the information supplied in the reports, and later in the Assize case, there is no clear information as to the cause of Pat Hough's dismissal. The only statement we get is that 'It was occasioned by the supervision exercised in the teachership of the National School', which translated probably means that the teacher was dismissed due to the inadequacy of his teaching skills as decided on the supervision of his work by the school's inspector. In another place there is a hint that the teacher's attendance was in question.

More detailed information is available in the Inspector Reports on Lorrha Male School in the National Archives.⁸ The school appears to have been going through a bad time from the early part of the 1870s. There are many references to the material condition of the school. Thomas Kelly was appointed monitor from 1 June 1871. Martin Crean was appointed on 17 July 1873. He was reprimanded for poor performance on 29 Sept 1873 and he left on 20 Nov 1873. It appears that Thomas Kelly was appointed in his place. On 31 July 1874 he was deemed ineligible for service in a National School for having grossly falsified his accounts. As a result he received no salary.

School numbers had declined in the meantime and there was a suggestion that the two schools in the one two-storey building be amalgamated. The school was placed on the suspended list from 1 April 1875. On 4 Feb 1876 the manager was informed that the averages of attendances of the three previous quarters did not warrant the continuation of Lorrha Male School. On 10 March 1876 the manager was informed that the Commissioners must be satisfied that 'each school will maintain a sufficient attendance before they can recognise the newly appointed teacher or restore grants'. Whatever transformation took place in the school circumstances we are not informed but on 31 March 1876 Pat Hough was appointed principal. He had been sent home from the Training Class to Cloughjordan, his former school, for insubordination! It was announced on 19 Oct 1876 that Rev. Jas Meagher, P.P. was recognised as manager 'pro tem'. On 7 Nov 1876 the school was restored to operation list from 1 Feb 1876. On 15 Dec 1876 the Board stated that the school attendance did not warrant an assistant.

Very little changed! On 1 Dec 1877 teacher P. Hough was admonished for want of a timetable, plus defective discipline and organisation in the school. On 3 May 1877 P. Hough was reminded he must keep school properly provided with class requisites. On 26 July 1877 Hough was severely reprimanded for slovenly and incorrect statement of school accounts and for low proficiency. This must have been the last straw for the manager and it appears that he sacked Hough after the reprimand on 26 July. A new teacher, Henry Riordan, was appointed on 1 Sept 1877. Some of Hough's friends put together a memorial in favour of his re-instatement on 12 Oct 1877 and sent it to the Commissioners for Education. The latter replied that they had no say in the matter as it was the manager, who had the power to appoint and remove teachers. This was the reason why Fr. Meagher became the target for the representations on favour of Pat Hough's reinstatement.⁹

North Tipperary Assizes

The case was heard at the North Tipperary Assizes in Nenagh on Tuesday 9 July 1878. The prisoners appeared before the Right Hon. Rickard Deasy, Lord Justice of Appeal. The grand jury of 23 was in attendance and it included T. B. Stoney of Portland Park, Lorrha. Both prisoners pleaded not guilty. Asked by the judge if he had engaged a Counsel, William Haugh replied that he had not but they expected a good jury!. A jury was sworn in and the case commenced.

Jane King gave evidence that she saw Anne Hough in the chapel at 5 o'clock on 25 May. She went up to see the harmonium and then into the sacristy. On the next morning she came to the chapel early, saw the sacristy door open and the harmonium burned. Cross-examined by William Haugh he asked the witness if she knew him and she replied that she didn't want to know him or his likes! Annie Hough made a rambling statement and alleged that the witness took a cup of tea with her that evening, and that she was only saying her prayers in the chapel. John Ryan gave evidence that he locked the principal door of the chapel at 8 o'clock on 25 May and bolted all the other doors as well. The last person he saw before he locked up was Anne Hough. The next morning when he went to the chapel he was surprised to see the harmonium burned and also a portion of the gallery.

Henry Riordan, schoolmaster, gave evidence that the prisoner had often threatened him and was a continual cause of annoyance to him. He had often to go different ways to avoid him.

When he finished his evidence William Haugh broke forth into a torrent of incoherent expressions with regard Riordan's evidence and finished by saying that Riordan had come forward to prosecute him for the sake of the £50 award. Mr. Riordan replied that he had exercised a great deal of forbearance towards the prisoner, but on the present occasion it was on his information to Constable Toole that Haugh had been arrested. Mrs Mary Mara gave evidence in effect that the male defendant came into her house in Lorrha on 6 May and asked if she had heard that Riordan, the schoolmaster, put fire in the lane. She said she did not. The defendant asked her a number of questions, which seemed to have a vague connection with the burning of the organ in the chapel. Brigid Quinlan, the school mistress in Lorrha, gave evidence that she spoke to the female prisoner before the burning of the harmonium, who said 'she required no aid but her own hand in seeking revenge of Fr. Meagher. She used very bad language in reference to the dismissal of her son from Lorrha school.

Major Percy, R.M. gave evidence that William Haugh had been before him on two occasions.

'In the first disposition he accused two other persons of burning the harmonium, among whom was young Rathford; in the second he said that the prisoner, Anne Hough, told him she would burn the second harmonium, as she did the first one; that afterwards he went to the chapel and saw her burning the organ; asked her why she did it, that someone would suffer for it; she said she had promised to do it and did not care.'¹⁰ At this stage of the evidence a letter, which purported to be written by Anne Hough, was read. It was addressed to Mr. Riordan. It contained a tirade of abuse against Fr. Meagher, and referred to the dismissal of Hough the schoolmaster. It included a laudation of the Hough family, of her and her connections, who helped to build the schoolhouse with their money and horses.

Riordan was advised to leave Lorrha, for no children would attend his school. It concluded with a flourish in favour of Fr. Con O'Brien, the late P.P.¹¹ 'as never having brought a tear from the child in the orphan eye, for which he would have his reward in the world where there would be no excuse'. It further hoped that Riordan would not put them to any more trouble. She finished by saying that it was strange that Hough was never before reported (to the Department), and there was no truth in the report made. Michael Kennedy was called on for the defence of the male prisoner. He stated he met Haugh that night at 10 o'clock and saw him at the wake about 12 o'clock. The wake was held about a mile from the village. The prisoner and he left the wake together and travelled about a quarter of a mile of the road together, when Haugh turned off at a stile to cross the fields. This concluded the evidence.

The jury retired, returned after two hours and informed the court that they had agreed on half the verdict. They were for acquitting William Haugh but could not agree as to Anne Hough. Mr. Ryan, Q.C. objected to a divided verdict. The jury retired a second time but returned again with the same decision. Some Act of Parliament was consulted following which the verdict as to the male prisoner was accepted and William Haugh was discharged.

Anne Haugh was sent back to prison and the judge stated 'they would see what was to be done in her case the next day.' Her case was mentioned again at 10 o'clock the following morning. She was called to the front of the dock. The judge asked what the Crown intended to do in her case. Mr. Ryan, Q.C. said to admit her to bail to come in and take her trial at the next Assizes. Anne Haugh said she had no one nearer than 14 miles to go bail for her. His Lordship said she could consult with the Governor of the Gaol, who would offer her facility to communicate with her friends.

Compensation Agreed

At the Presentment Sessions at Nenagh on 9 Nov 1878, there was an application from Mr. John O'Meara, J.P., one of the trustees of Lorrha chapel, for compensation for the chapel organ and the part of the gallery in which it stood, that were maliciously burned on 26 May by some person or persons unknown. Mr. Nolan, solicitor, who supported the claim, said that it was the second burning, which had taken place in the chapel. There was no compensation for the injury sustained.¹² There was a discussion on whether the burning was malicious. A widow woman, Jane King, gave evidence to show that the burning was malicious. Mr O'Meara stated that the woman who was in jail to be tried for the offence at the next Assizes was in the habit of abusing the parish priest and the parish committee. She told them there would be no organ there soon, that it would be burned. He also informed the court that the cost of repairing the damage was £119, which included the price of the organ. The committee only looked for the sum that would cover cost out of pocket, which was £80. It was unanimously agreed to grant the sum sought. The question then was the area of the levy, the parish or the barony. Following discussion it was agreed to recommend the levy off the parish.¹³

Trial of Anne Hough

It appears that Anne Hough was let out on bail and her case was heard in the Leinster Winter Assizes at Waterford Court before the Right Hon. Mr. Justice Fitzgerald on 17 Dec 1878. Anne Haugh pleaded not guilty. Mr. Tandy stated the case for the Crown. He said that the removal of the prisoner's son from the Catholic school in Lorrha, in which he was schoolmaster, was the reason assigned for the deed. Jane King gave evidence that on the evening in question she saw the accused in the church and near the harmonium. She left about six o'clock and left some women, including the accused in the chapel after her. When she returned there the following morning, the harmonium was burned. The prisoner questioned the witness with a view to show that she left the church with witness and that she afterwards took tea with her, and that a number of women were left behind in the church.

Witness (to his Lordship): 'I had no suspicion of the prisoner.'

John Ryan swore that on the evening in question he locked the chapel door at 8 o'clock. He left no one in the chapel. The prisoner was the last person he saw in the chapel. She was kneeling at the altar rails as if she was praying and when he returned the next morning, he found that the place had been on fire. Henry Riordan, the schoolmaster at Lorrha school, who replaced Pat Hough, the son of the prisoner, stated he was in the school for six months before the fire. The main evidence of the prosecution was a letter to

Mr. Riordan, purported to be written by the prisoner. A witness, Bridget Quinlan, claimed she knew the prisoner and was familiar with her handwriting.

The letter bemoaned the loss of their former teacher and stated that Mr. Hough 'was treated too bad.' It continued: 'It is well-known his grandfather and uncles raised the school with their money, men and horses, and it was too bad to supplant him. ... we had a great school, which never will be seen until he is returned to his right. We all thought you would quit before this, but if you take a friend's advice you will leave the school to them who has the best right to it.' Later the letter continues: 'How was it Hough was not reported with the inspector before this?' And so on it went.

William Haugh gave evidence that he was coming home from a funeral on the night and saw a light in the chapel. He went into the chapel and saw the prisoner coming down from the gallery and asked her what she had done. She told him 'she burned the last harmonium; that she was a heart-scalded woman in consequence of her son being removed from the school, and if there was a harmonium put there every day in the week she would burn it.'

Another witness, Mary Keenan, stated that she knew Anne Hough and in a conversation abused Rev. James Maher for sending her son away. She said she would go and see her son and then be ready for Nenagh jail. She added that the harmonium was a nuisance in the place and she couldn't say her prayers with it.' Rev. James Maher¹⁴ also gave evidence, which was limited to describing the damage done to the church by the fire.

Prisoner Replied

This closed the case for the prosecution and the prisoner made a lengthy statement in her defence. She said William Haugh was a bad character in the neighbourhood and could not be relied on and before God 'she did not return to the chapel after the rosary, nor would she for all she ever saw set fire to the house of God.' When the case closed his lordship told the jury that the case rested solely on the evidence of William Haugh and, if the jury believed his evidence, the case against her was proved. There was a partial corroboration of the man's evidence in the testimony of Miss Quinlan who deposed that she knew the prisoner's hand writing and 'believed' the letter was in her handwriting'. He went on to say that the man, Haugh, may have been telling them the truth but had 'evinced a demeanour in giving his evidence that, to say the least, was not pleasant. It was a strange thing that if he heard the threat made by the prisoner – it was strange if he didn't report the matter to the parish priest, that he did not do so to the man who he knew was in care of the chapel.'¹⁵

The jury, after a brief consultation, found the prisoner not guilty. When the jury returned the verdict the prisoner came to the front of the dock with an appeal to the court: 'Oh, my lord,' cried the woman, 'when I go outside now I don't know which side to turn. I don't know the road to Nenagh.'

Judge: 'Someone should show the woman the way home.'

Prisoner: 'I have no money, my lord, to bring me on the way to Nenagh.'

Judge: (to the governor of the jail) – 'Is there a fund for this purpose?'

Mr. Andrews (deputy governor) – 'We have a fund, my lord.'

Judge: 'Where does she live?'

Mr. Bolton (Crown Solicitor, Tipperary) – ‘Lorrha, my lord. Eighteen miles from Nenagh.” Judge: ‘I think that when the Crown brings a woman so far from home they should see to have her brought back.’

Mr. Bolton: ‘That shall be done, my lord.’¹⁶

The prisoner was then put back until she would be sent home.

Short Profile

In preparation for her appearance at the Waterford Winter Sessions, Anne Hough was brought from Lorrha to the County and City Waterford Gaol on 13 Dec 1878. She is entered in the gaol register as prisoner 331 and her crime is described thus: ‘Did maliciously set fire to a – Catholic Chapel.’ Her age is given as 50 years. She was five feet tall, had grey hair, brown eyes, a fair complexion and a round face. She had a distinguishing mark of a ‘lump on top of her head.’ Her occupation is given as ‘serving –.’ She was from Lorrha, Co. Tipperary, had been tried at Nenagh and was acquitted in Waterford Court.¹⁷

(I failed to find a death notice for Anne Hough.)

References

- 1 Following the repeal of the Penal Laws the Catholic Church began to build public places of worship. These were referred to as mass houses and later chapels. The word, 'church', could only refer to Church of Ireland places of worship. During the second half of the nineteenth century, as the Catholic Church built bigger and more substantial places of worship, the word church came to be used in relation to them. At the time of this event. Lorrha Church was still referred to as a chapel. Some readers may recall that Redwood Church used to be referred to as 'The Chapel'.
- 2 Most readers will not be familiar with the 'pew wars' that raged during the nineteenth century. While the population of Ireland remained extraordinarily high until after the famine, it was not a practical proposition to have seating in the churches, which were mostly only big enough for people standing, and there was also the cost involved. After the famine congregations were smaller and seating was introduced. Initially they were few in number and reserved for people who had paid for them. The disposal of the pews did not always satisfy the people involved and gave rise to much dissatisfaction, even to violence at times.
- 3 *Nenagh Guardian*, June 1, 1878.
- 4 P.P. Lorrha 1876-1880. He was responsible for setting up a school at Redwood Castle on September 8, 1879. He died in 1881 and was succeeded by Rev. R. Kennedy.
- 5 According to the Lorrha Parish Register William Haugh was born on 27 July 1834, the son of Patrick Haugh and Ann Duffy. He had a sister, Cath, born 6 Aug 1837. It appears that he married Hanora Cleary (b.21 Jan 1846) on 12 Oct 1864.
- 6 Ibid 5 June 1878.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 ED 2/143 (pages 3 & 4).
- 9 The inspector reports include the following additional information. The Commissioners agreed to pay Henry Riordan's salary up to December 1877 but that 'it wouldn't continue unless there was an increase in the attendance average'. On 25 June 1879 Riordan was 'admonished on low proficiency and reminded that a higher standard was expected from a teacher of his standing'. He left the employment on 31 July 1879.
Phil Cronin was appointed on 1 Aug 1879 and left on 31 Dec 1880. Felix Cronin, age 23 years, was appointed 1 Jan 1881.
- 10 Ibid, 10 July 1878, page 3.
- 11 Fr. Cornelius O'Brien (1796-1886) was parish priest of Lorrha & Dorrha from 1838-1886. Redwood chapel was built by him in 1853.
- 12 Ibid 9 Nov 1878, page 3.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Sometimes the Irish version of his name is used in the reports.
- 15 *Waterford News and General Advertised*, December 20, 1878.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 County & City of Waterford Gaol: Criminal Register and Description Book 1870.