

'A FATAL AFFRAY' IN THE FAR PASS

BY HUGH DALY



The location of the affray

FATAL AFFRAY AT POYNTZPASS.—It appears by accounts from different quarters, that on last Christmas-day, a number of persons, Protestant and Catholic, were drinking in a public house in the village of Poyntzpass, when party toasts were introduced—some of the company proposing the health of “Mr. BROWNLOW,” and others, that of “Colonel VERNER.” This, of course, excited warm words—from words they very soon came to blows—and the quarrel, we regret to state, had a fatal termination; a man of the name of Baird, a Protestant, and who had attached himself to the “VERNER” party, having received a deadly blow on the head with a loaded whip. He did not long survive the injury. An Inquest was subsequently held on the body, and a verdict of “Wilful Murder” (we believe) returned against five individuals (two of whom are Protestants, and the remainder Roman Catholics) who have been all lodged in Down Gaol. Their names are—John Campbell, James Magee, John Magee, George Smith, Andrew Taylor.—*(Dublin Evening Post.)*

But why should toasts to two landed,
Co Armagh gentlemen have evoked such a
violent reaction?

The reason is explained below.

Political Context in 1828

Like many another period in our history, the late 1820s was a tumultuous time in Irish politics, for Daniel O'Connell 's great campaign for Catholic Emancipation was reaching crisis point. If this concession was granted one of the outcomes would be that Catholics would be allowed to sit in Parliament at Westminster. The prospect of this caused great anxiety amongst Protestants, particularly in Ulster, for they feared that it could mean an end to Protestant ascendancy and the Protestant crown. In County Armagh, where the influence of the Orange Order was strongest, while some liberal Protestants supported Emancipation, the vast majority were vehemently opposed to it.

Two individuals who represented these polarised opinions were **Charles Brownlow** from Lurgan, MP for Armagh 1818-1832 and **Captain William Verner**, from Churchill in north Armagh, a veteran of Waterloo and High Sherriff of County Armagh.

1823 – Daniel O'Connell and Richard Shiel formed the Irish Catholic Association, with the aim of adopting measures to obtain Catholic Emancipation. While early opposition to Catholic Emancipation was quite disorganised, there were



Charles Brownlow



William Verner

enough elected members in the House of Lords and the House of Parliament to stifle any motion in that direction, despite general elections and changes of prime minister.

1824 – William Brownlow (who at this time was a staunch member of the Orange Order) made a vigorous case for the suppression of the Catholic Association calling them “factious demagogues and ignorant upstarts”. During this year, Catholic Association ‘rent meetings’ were taking place in County Armagh. Contributors from our area were F Lennon (Tandragee), J Magill (Tandragee), McGurk PP (Ballymore & Mullabrack) and J Quin (Ballymore & Mullabrack).

1825 – During the King's Speech to Parliament, George IV called for the speedy annihilation of the Catholic Association. Subsequently the Government implemented the ‘Unlawful Societies of Ireland Bill’, but whether this was intentional or not, the new Bill also applied to the Orange Order.

During this year, Charles Brownlow had a dramatic conversion. In a speech to Parliament on 19th April, Charles advised that his opinion had altered, and that Catholics recognise the Pope as their spiritual leader and nothing more. Back home in County Armagh many people were vocal in their dismay at Brownlow's conversion. Foremost among these was Captain William

Verner. Brownlow's speech resulted in his effigies being burned in Lurgan, Armagh City and the Moy. After the burning of Brownlow's effigy in Moy, an effigy of his opponent William Verner was carried triumphantly around the town by his supporters, "amid loud and general cheering".

1826 – A General Election took place in County Armagh. The return of the liberal Henry Caulfield (son of Lord Charlemont) was considered a formality, with the other seat being contested by Charles Brownlow and the new choice of Orangeism William Verner. Caulfield topped the poll with 2,897 votes and the second seat going to Brownlow with 2,563 votes. Verner lost out with 1,894 votes.

1827 – William Verner organised meetings in Benburb and the Moy to petition Parliament against concessions to Catholics. These and other meetings were the start of organised opposition to emancipation. There was occasional violence in the county and faction fighting led to several deaths.

1828 – In January the Duke of Wellington became Prime Minister with his friend Robert Peel (Previously MP for Tipperary and Chief Secretary for Ireland) as his Home Secretary. They were viewed as 'anti-emancipation' men and would have eased concerns of Protestants.

Some successes for emancipation in the Houses of Parliament were met with defeat in the House of Lords. Then in June, Daniel O'Connell was elected as MP for Co Clare but was prevented from taking his seat because of his religion. Shortly afterwards, George Dawson, MP for Derry

announced his 'conversion' to the cause of Emancipation.

In September 1828, the Protestant response was to form what were known as 'Brunswick Clubs'. These differed from the Orange Order in that they primarily consisted of gentry and had strict rules. President of the Brunswick Club in Tandragee

was Lord Mandeville and Vice-Presidents included Dean Carter, Robert Harden of Harrybrook, David Lucas of

Druminargle, William Loftie, Conway Dobbs, Acton House and Colonel William Verner. According to The Newry Telegraph, their first meeting attracted a crowd of 40,000 people. In his speech, Conway Dobbs referred to the sufferings of Protestant people in the 1641

rebellion while other speakers advised that they were prepared to take up arms.

So in summary, there were two very clear camps, that is, Charles Brownlow who supported Daniel O'Connell's Catholic Emancipation and on the other side was Colonel William Verner who vehemently opposed Emancipation.

Meanwhile unbeknownst to the general public, Parliament was slowly moving towards

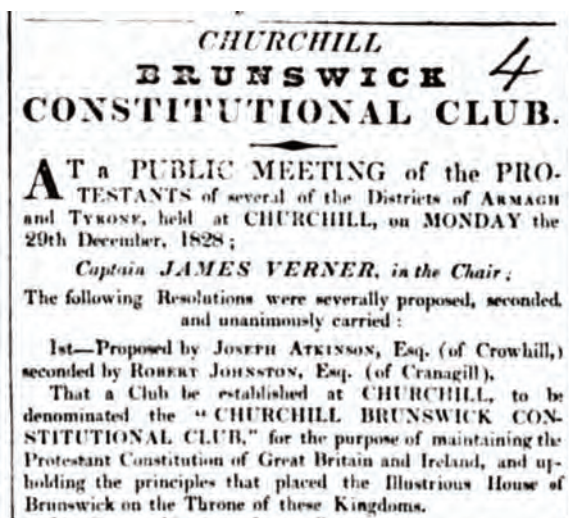
acceptance of Catholic Emancipation and was starting to make plans for such.

So that was the context in which the 'fatal affray' occurred.

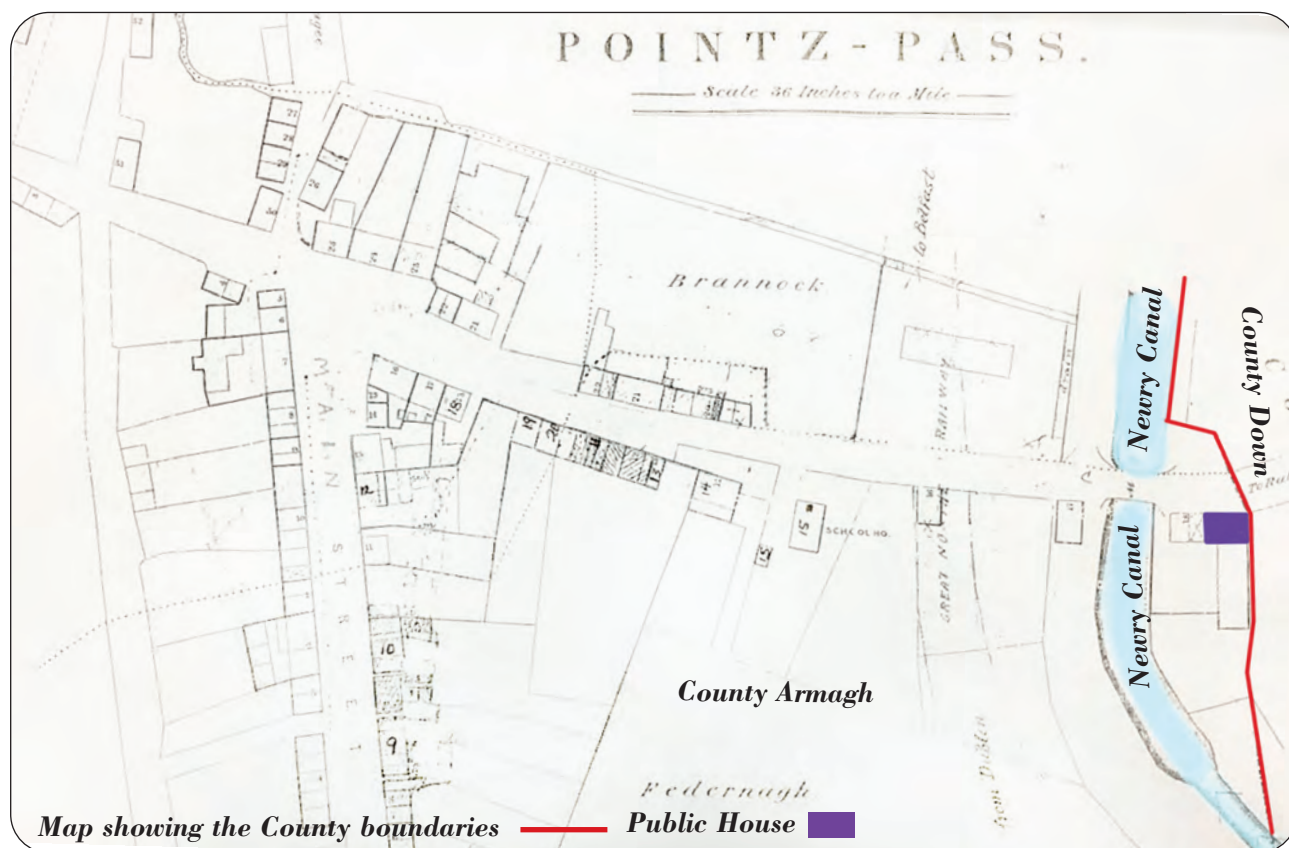
'The Newry Telegraph' report of the affray, quoted above, continued as follows:

"An inquest was subsequently held on the body and a verdict of wilful murder (we believe) returned against five individuals (two of whom are

“Charles Brownlow had a dramatic conversion”



Newspaper report of Brunswick Club Meeting



Protestants and the remainder Roman Catholics) who have been lodged in Down Gaol. Their names are – John Campbell, James Magee, John Magee, George Smith, Andrew Taylor ...”

A letter from P. Brennan, Chief Constable for Co Armagh to his superior Major Davey gives some more details of the events:

**Ballybot,
Newry, Armagh Side.**

28th December, 1828.

Sir,

I have the honour to state, for your information, that on the night of Thursday 25th December. A man by the name of Beard (sic) was murdered in the neighbourhood of Poyntzpass bordering on my district (but not in the County Armagh). As it was the men under my charge and stationed in Poyntzpass who, tho’ repeatedly beaten into their barracks and being eventually obliged to take a circuitous route to pursue them, succeeded in apprehending five of the offenders. I think it is my duty to report to you thereon.

I attended the funeral today and, on enquiry, I find it to have originated from party spirit, the deceased being an Orangeman and, from the increased numbers which attended the funeral and the spirits of exasperation which seems to prevail, I dread that consequences perhaps equally fatal may result from some act of retaliation and may keep alive the spirit of disturbance in this hitherto peaceful District.

Signed: P Brennan
(Chief Constable).

So, although the dispute began in the public house, it didn’t end there. The trouble spilled out on the street and a mob chased the police back into their barracks, (which was in today’s Railway Street.) So this was quite a major event in the small village. The final sentence of the letter is quite chilling. Chief Constable Brennan was, of course, well aware of outrages happening elsewhere in Co Armagh and throughout Ulster and recognised that, if the trouble here was not nipped in the bud, it could lead to further fatalities.

In one important respect Chief Constable

The principal conviction for manslaughter, was that of *John Campbell*, indicted for the murder of James Bain, at Poyntzpass, on 25th December. The affray which led to this unfortunate homicide originated, it will be recollected, in a *party* dispute in a public-house, on last Christmas Day: the particulars were recorded in THE TELEGRAPH at the time of the occurrence. Campbell was tried on Friday, and sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment and hard labour. Connected with the above trial, and arising out of the same transaction, was an indictment for assault, of an aggravated character, on which Andrew Taylor was found guilty and ordered to be imprisoned for a twelvemonth. The other individuals convicted during the Assizes were, on Saturday, sentenced respectively by the Court as follows:

Thomas Boyd and Moses Johnston, for horse stealing.— Judgment of death recorded.

James Rogan and John McKenna, for sheep stealing; James Reynolds, felony; William Robinson, do.; Cornelius Burns, do.; Abraham Atkins and William Best, attempt at highway robbery; James Armstrong, felony; Jane Hennessey, do.; Margaret Armstrong and Sarah Devlin, do.; Bridget Maruion, do.— Seven years' transportation.

Brennan was mistaken, for the public house in which the trouble arose was, in fact, in Co Armagh. While many take it that the Newry Canal marks the boundary between Counties Armagh and Down - and it does in some places - it does not here. The drawing of the county boundary pre-dated the canal and today Poyntzpass Orange Hall and the Baptist church, which is on the site of the public house, are both in Co Armagh.

On April 4th 1829, the local papers carried

Reports from the Assizes

reports of the court proceedings when those arrested appeared at Downpatrick Assizes.

'The Newry Telegraph' reported that, "*The principal conviction for manslaughter was that of John Campbell indicted for the murder of James Bain sic. (Baird) at Poyntzpass on 25th December. Campbell was tried on Friday and sentenced to 18 months imprisonment and hard labour.*" Andrew Taylor was found guilty of

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“assault of an aggravated character and ordered to be imprisoned for a twelve month”. The charges against the others arrested appear to have been dropped.

I imagine that James Baird's people would have regarded 18-months as an extraordinarily light sentence for manslaughter for, at the same Assizes, Thomas Boyd and Moses Johnston were sentenced to death for stealing a horse and several others to transportation for seven years for sheep-stealing.

However, just two weeks after the Down Assizes, on 19th April 1829, the Roman Catholic Relief Act, granting 'Emancipation', received the Royal assent and became law.

Poyntzpass Village in 1829

The village of Poyntzpass has its origins as one of the few places where one could safely cross the great, largely impassable, Glan Bog which stretched from Lough Neagh to Carlingford Lough.



Joseph Seawright's Warehouses

As such it had some strategic importance and when a castle of some sort was built here in the 16th century, a garrison was stationed there to guard the 'pass'. In time a small settlement grew up around it. This settlement, which came to be referred to as the 'Far Pass' is by far the oldest part of the village, for the rest of Poyntzpass, on the Armagh side, dates from the 1780's, when the monthly fair was moved from Acton and the new Acton Parish Church was built by Alexander Stewart of Acton. The public house, in which this incident began,



Henry Clarke's Shop

was situated in what was, and still is, referred to as 'The Far Pass'. It is unclear who was the landlord of the public house in 1828 and the establishment has changed hands several times and has different uses in the course of the following century. Some of the owners were: 1859 Jane Frances Whigham; 1879 Joseph Seawright (Publican); 1919 Maria Caroline McClements; 1919 John Kelly Limited (coal importers and merchants); 1934 Henry Clarke (Grocery and hardware). The building was demolished about ten years ago.

Probably because of the fair and its proximity to the Newry Canal, Poyntzpass grew rapidly and by the time of the affray was a bustling place. While there is no precise information about the village in 1828, a Topographical Survey of 1835 gives some information about the village a short time later. It then consisted of 2 three-storey houses, 86 two-storey houses, 5 one-storey houses and 22 mud cabins. There were 9 spirit dealers, 2 grocers, 2 haberdashers, 3 apothecaries, a baker, a reed maker, 3 shoemakers, a nail maker, a hardware shop, a painter and glazier, 4 lodging houses 2 tailors a dispensary and a blacksmith. There were two churches and two schools.

No doubt the authorities hoped that following the granting of emancipation and the conclusion of the Assizes, that peace and tranquillity would return to Poyntzpass and elsewhere.

Unfortunately that didn't happen. In early May, 'The Newry Telegraph' reported an incident that showed that there was still a great deal of tension

in the area.

The report stated that,

"The inhabitants of Poyntzpass were alarmed, it appears, one evening last week by the appearance in the village about the hour of eight, of a party of people with drums and music playing party tunes such as 'Croppies lie down', 'The Protestant Boys' &c..."

After a very tense stand-off with a group of villagers the musicians left the village by the Tandragee Road but threatened to return. However due to the action of the Magistrate Wm.



Poyntzpass Orange Hall, formerly the home of the Wilkinson family

Loftie there was no further trouble and while there were outrages here and there throughout Co Armagh, in the following months life in this area seemed to have settled down again.

But then in September 1829, things did take a serious turn for the worse. At 1am on Friday 25th September, some persons unknown carried out an arson attack on the house of one Arthur Wilkinson. This attack was a direct link to the Christmas Day affray, for Arthur Wilkinson had been an important witness for the prosecution at the inquest and at the murder trial at Downpatrick Assizes. Arthur Wilkinson's house, in the Far Pass was, I believe on the site of the current Orange Hall in Poyntzpass and therefore directly opposite the public house where the affray took place. It appears that some people from one side or the other did not take too kindly to Arthur

MALICIOUS BURNING AT POYNTZPASS.—Our readers may recollect the lamentable circumstance of the murder of a man named James Baird, at Christmas last, in the village of Poyntzpass, as stated in our paper at the time. A respectable man, named Arthur Wilkinson, having been called on as a witness, both at the inquest, and on the subsequent trial at Downpatrick, has, we are informed, been considered a *marked man* ever since. It appears, that about one o'clock on the morning of Friday, the 25th instant, while Wilkinson was absent, having gone to Warrenpoint, his house, which unfortunately was thatched, was set on fire, and *nine persons, who had been asleep, and were with some difficulty, arou et,* were nearly sacrificed to the vengeful hate of the ruthless incendiary. A coal which was found in the back yard, had fallen from the roof where the thatch took fire: and it is considered from the height of the roof from the ground, the coal must have been placed in the roof by means of a long pole or fork. By the exertions of the people in the neighbourhood, and the house being near the canal, the flames were happily extinguished. Our correspondent, to whom we are indebted for these few particulars, concludes with this emphatic and very expressive interrogatory—“Is this the boasted civilization of the North?” We deeply regret that in any part of Ulster, but particularly in the County of Down, any miscreants should be found capable of perpetrating an outrage so truly diabolical. Nor has it occurred in a lonely sequestered spot, but in the midst of a thriving village. This not only adds to our astonishment, but it adds, also, to the deep enormity of the crime; for had the flames not been speedily subdued, there is no knowing how far the fell work of destruction might have been carried.—NEWRY TELEGRAPH.

Newspaper report of the attack

being a witness, and therefore decided to exact revenge.

Arthur Wilkinson was an ex-serviceman. He was very probably descended from Roger Wilkinson, one of the original settlers Charles Poyntz brought from his home in Gloucestershire in 1610 to form the village of Acton. He had enlisted in the 83rd Regiment of Foot, a British Army line infantry regiment in February 1793. The Regiment had been formed in Ireland for service in the French Revolutionary Wars and Arthur, a labour, had

enlisted aged 18. In 1794 half this new Regiment was sent to the ‘Maroon War’ in Jamaica, while the other half, including Arthur Wilkinson, went to Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, where a slave revolt had occurred in tandem with the French Revolution

The Regiment took heavy losses both in encounters with the French but mostly through disease. Arthur survived, but in April 1899, at the age of just 23 he was discharged on medical grounds and “*recommended as a proper object of His Majesty’s Royal Bounty of Chelsea Hospital*”. The reason for his discharge was, “*But being sickly and having enlarged viscera the*

MALICIOUS BURNING

AND

Reward.

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AT a MEETING of the Undersigned M. GISTRATES, held on WEDNESDAY Sept. 30, 1829, at POYNTZPASS, to investigate the circumstances connected with a setting on Fire the House of ARTHUR WILKINSON, situate in that part of the Villa of Poyntzpass called Farpass, in the County of Down. After minutely investigating all the circumstances connected with said Fire, they were unanimously of opinion, that it was done with a malicious intent; but no evidence, sufficient to convict, having been elicited, they, holding in detestation such atrocity, feel called upon, in conjunction with their Neighbours, to join in offering a REWARD to any Person or Persons who shall, within Three Calendar Months from the date hereof, give such information as may lead to the Conviction of the perpetrators of said outrage.

THOMAS CARTER, J. P.

A. M. TREVOR, J. P.


NICHOLAS CHAS. WHYTE, J. P.

M. SAMPSON, J. P.

TREVOR CORRY, J. P.

Reward offer

£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.		
William Fivey,	20	0	0	James Macune,	1	0	0
Thomas Carter,	10	0	0	James Baird,	1	0	0
Trevor Corry,	10	0	0	Peter Keenan,	1	0	0
William Loftie,	10	0	0	James Vent,	1	0	0
Robert Harden,	10	0	0	John Stewart,	1	0	0
Nicholas C. Whyte,	10	0	0	Joseph Graham,	1	0	0
A. M. Trevor,	10	0	0	John McShane,	1	0	0
M. Sampson,	10	0	0	Patrick Coulan,	0	10	0
Conway R. Dobbs,	10	0	0	George Meredith,	0	10	0
Savage Hall,	5	0	0	John Mathews,	0	10	0
Art. McGuirk, P.P.	5	0	0	Thomas Harvey,	0	10	0
Captain Brennan,	5	0	0	Patrick Quinn,	0	10	0
Alex. Richmond,	5	0	0	Thomas Graham,	0	10	0
Arthur Wilkinson,	5	0	0	William Monaghan,	0	10	0
James Hardy,	2	0	0	Neal Haffy,	0	10	0
W. Nesbitt, jun.,	2	0	0	Edward Maguill,	0	10	0
W. Crothers,	2	0	0	Charles Smyth,	0	10	0
John Graham,	2	0	0	Margaret Blackwood,	0	10	0
John Bennett,	2	0	0	Bernard Devy,	0	10	0
George Bennett,	2	0	0	James Devy,	0	10	0
Wm. Maston,	2	0	0	Crawford Wholley,	0	10	0
Anthony Madden,	2	0	0	James Liggan,	0	10	0
James Maggill,	2	0	0	Thomas Reavey,	0	10	0
Michael O'Hare,	2	0	0	Felix Couvery,	0	10	0
Michael Rice,	2	0	0	Patrick Blackero,	0	10	0
John Wilkinson,	2	0	0	James M'Gee,	0	10	0
James Whighan,	2	0	0	Samuel Ferguson,	0	10	0
Wm. M'Keag,	2	0	0	Samuel B. Marshall,	0	10	0
Thomas Marston,	2	0	0	Cabra M'Can,	0	10	0
Margaret Doran,	2	0	0	Terence Collans,	0	10	0
David Richmond,	2	0	0	Edward Grogan,	0	10	0
John Stokes,	1	1	0	Michael Morgan,	0	10	0
James Smyth,	1	1	0	James Hamilton,	0	5	0
John Little,	1	0	0	James Sheils,	0	5	0
John Hanbo,	1	0	0	Thomas Heanin,	0	5	0
Wm. Shaw,	1	0	0	Robert Martin,	0	5	0
James Wiley,	1	0	0	Joseph Thomson,	0	5	0
Rose Morgan,	1	0	0	Hanna Doran,	0	2	6
Wm. Skrait,	1	0	0	Edward Smith,	0	2	6
Thomas Wilkinson,	1	0	0	Francis Hail,	0	2	6
Benjamin Mallough,	1	0	0	Mary Loy,	0	2	6
Thomas Donald,	1	0	0	Jane Maguill,	0	2	0
Peter M'Elevy,	1	0	0				


TWENTY POUNDS will be given for such Private Information as may lead to the Conviction of those concerned in this Outrage.

List of subscribers

consequences of fever in St Domingo in April 1797"

Back home Arthur married Elizabeth Wiley and together they had seven children. Being an ex-soldier with a good record of service, Arthur's evidence was likely to be regarded as trustworthy.

He was not at home when his house was set on fire but there were nine family members in the house. It was believed that the arsonist had placed a burning coal of the thatched roof, in retaliation for Arthur's evidence. Neighbours managed to restrict the damage by taking water from the nearby canal.

The burning of Arthur Wilkinson's home caused a great deal of outrage across all sections of the village community and surrounding area. The local magistrates met on Wednesday 30th September 1829 and agreed to put up a reward of £20 for information that could lead to the conviction of the perpetrators. Below are the names of the magistrates and local people who donated money towards helping Arthur Wilkinson and his family.

Contributors appear from right across the village and the surrounding area. Unfortunately we don't know if the offer of the reward was successful, but lack of any other reports in contemporary press suggests that nobody was convicted of arson.

The whole affair must have had a terrible effect on Arthur Wilkinson's wife and family and before the end of the year, Arthur petitioned the War Office asking for land and immediate transport for him and his family to Canada. In his letter he informed the authorities of the arson and that he had been forced to resign his job in the coal yard. He also stated that in November he had received a note identifying him as a 'marked man'. While the War Office granted him land, they declined to pay for the passage so when he and his family left for Canada early in 1830, they had to pay their own way.

Arthur and Elizabeth Wilkinson and their seven children settled in Simcoe County, Ontario, Canada where some descendants still live.

Tranquillity Returns to the Village

No other horrors appear to have affected Poyntzpass after the arson and after the outrage in September Fairs were held on a regular basis.

The village surgeon Dr Nesbitt sailed from Newry to Quebec on 12th May 1830. He was actually employed as surgeon on the ship. Prior to his sailing and emigration to the New World, a sumptuous dinner was held for him, in Bennetts Inn. There were 40 'elite of the vicinity' invited who presented him with a cup in recognition of his service here.