



Night of the Big Wind

6/7 January 1839

The Night of the Big Wind is now part of Irish folk tradition – but it was a real event with hurricane-force winds. It was reckoned to be the most severe storm to hit Ireland for many centuries.

The *Northern Whig* report below mentions several ships in serious trouble in Belfast Lough, but the full extent only becomes apparent when one is presented with the full list of shipwrecks on 6 and 7 January around the coasts of the British Isles. See the list here in Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_shipwrecks_in_January_1839

Given the following news reports, it seems unlikely that Bloomfield House and farm would have been unscathed. And what about Beer's Mills? Not a word in the press.

Northern Whig, Tuesday 08 January 1839, page 2

THE STORM.

Belfast, and the North of Ireland generally, have been visited with a hurricane, such as we have not experienced more than once, within the memory of the oldest residents of our town. On Saturday night, after a slight fall of snow, the ground was covered, on Sunday morning, with a dark, dense frost; which, about noon on Sunday, began to resolve itself into rain; and this most uncomfortable change of weather continued until about one o'clock next morning, when it was succeeded by a perfect hurricane. The wind, in the first symptoms of its violence, blew from W.N.W.; but, as its rage increased, it shifted from W. to W. by N., and augmented in force, till, finally, it settled due S.W. Melancholy, however, is the tale of desolation which marked the track of the tempest; and lamentable are the accounts (too numerous for insertion) of the destruction which it has brought, even in our own immediate neighbourhood.

Wherever we turn our eyes, the most dreadful ravages of the hurricane are to be traced in our streets, squares, lanes, and unprotected suburbs, where — and especially in the latter — thousands have been bereft of a shelter. Such a scene of utter desolation we were never before called to witness. Houses erected but a few years: — and some of them only a few months — left totally roofless; hundreds of upper stories rendered untenable; and scarcely a roof, in the wide boundary of Belfast, unscathed by the unsparing tempest. From eleven till half-past four, the gale was so terrific, that it created universal alarm for the safety of life and property. And, when the grey dawn of Winter broke on the affrighted citizens, a scene of universal wreck and ruin met their eyes, in houses unroofed, chimneys overthrown, walls prostrated, and lives destroyed.

We this morning found our streets, without one exception, strewed with slates, tiles, and *debris* of chimneys, while, during the day, the shops were closed, as if a universal calamity

had befallen the town. We repeat, that, within the memory of the oldest resident, such a storm has never been witnessed. Not a roof in Belfast has escaped; and it was supposed, at one period, that many more lives would have been lost than have been. Among the numerous accidents we have to detail are the following: —

Every enclosure wall protecting building-ground has been partially or wholly levelled, more particularly those in the neighbourhood of Mary-street, Montgomery-street, Great George's-street, &c. The chimney of Messrs. Mulholland & Co.'s flax-spinning factory, 184 feet high, has been almost wholly blown down, having destroyed a preparing-room in its fall, and a packing-loft was so seriously damaged, that it will be impossible to work in it for two weeks. The chimney thrown down at this manufactory was the most handsome specimen of masonry in the North of Ireland, and was supposed to be proof against the most violent war of the elements.

We are informed, that £1,000 will hardly cover the injury done at those extensive works. The chimney of the Falls Flax Mill — a beautiful column, 150 feet in height, has also been blown down, — but will not occasion more than two or three days' stoppage of the factory — and, a short distance up the same road, the chimney of Howie & Co.'s bleachworks was nearly levelled, though newly erected; but did not, we are happy to say, occasion a suspension of operations there, as there was a sufficiency of water-power to drive the machinery. We regret, also, to have to announce the fall of the splendid funnel shaft at Graymount bleach-green, near the Cave-hill. But the foregoing casualties were trifling, were it not our painful duty to announce the loss of two lives, and other serious injury to life and limb, which this tempest has occasioned. By the fall of an old and exposed house on the old Lodge-road, a weaver named Hugh Curran, a native of Dumfriesshire, and his wife, were overwhelmed in the ruins: the former was killed, but, by the exertions of some benevolent individuals, the latter was rescued, though in a very precarious state, in which she still remains.

The large and beautiful new weaving factory of Messrs. Ledwich & Dickson, upwards of 150 feet in length, opposite the Lunatic Asylum, which had been roofed in a few days before, was prostrated to the ground, and the watchman killed. He was a quiet, industrious man — a Waterloo pensioner, and has left a widow and one daughter. On the new Dublin road, the injury done by the storm has been particularly severe. We there notice an inhabited house nearly destroyed, and an unfinished building, opposite the Ulster Railway entrance, with both gables blown down. —

Wherever the streets or detached buildings were exposed to the gale, the damage done has been frightful. Serious injury has been inflicted on our merchants and shop-keepers, by the fall of chimneys., &c. through their roofs. About £200 worth of china and delf was destroyed in the warehouse of Mr. Robson, High-street, in this manner. The following casualties occurred in our Lough, among the shipping moored there: —

The *Trial*, of Carlisle, Brown, master, laden with oats, and bound for Glasgow, ashore below Holywood — full of water, crew saved. The *Eliza*, of Killough, in ballast, ashore below Holywood — crew saved. The *Mermaid*, of Belfast, was driven ashore about two miles below Holywood: a man and boy foundered. Two sloops and one brig, ashore on Holywood bank. A sloop, said to be laden with barley, sunk in Garmoyle Roads; crew supposed to be lost. The ship *Glasgow* drove from her moorings in Garmoyle, and went ashore on the point of Holywood bank. A great number of vessels were also driven out to sea, the names of which we do not know.

In the rural districts, in our neighbourhood, the tempest has been equally severe. Haggards, stored with the rich spoils of harvest, have been scattered to the winds; and many a poor farmer, in addition to the loss of his livestock, by the fall of out-houses, will have to mourn the devastation of the grain crops on which he depends for the payment of his rent. In Lisburn, we learn, much injury was done, in the blowing down of the loftiest trees, unroofing of houses, &c.; and nine or ten persons were unfortunately hurt, more or less. At Comber, one of the chimneys of Mr. Miller's distillery was thrown down, destroying, in its fall, a brewing copper and a kiln. The windmill in front of the new Meeting-house at the same place was also upset; and a great number of the houses in the village unroofed. The farmers of Castlereagh, Moneyrea, and Drumbo have suffered most severely. Trees, windmills, and houses, have been involved in indiscriminate wreck. Among those who have been the greatest sufferers, we may notice the Rev. F. Blakely, James Birch, Esq., &c. We have just heard, that the Enniskillen Mail, on its way to Belfast, was blown into the Canal, near Monaghan, and that the driver had one of his thighs fractured. We dread, however, worse news than all we have detailed, from the English and Welsh coasts. Above 400 of the street lamps were damaged, in Belfast.

The *Belfast News-Letter*, Tuesday 8 January 1839, page 2, covered many of those same stories but one paragraph read:

... In the country districts surrounding Belfast, the destruction of trees, even of the oldest growth, has been immense, and furnishes impressive evidence as to the violence of the storm. We understand that at Belvoir, the residence of Sir R. Bateson, Bart. M.P. much damage of this kind has been done, and even the castle itself has suffered. At Annadale, the oldest oaks were torn up by the roots, and strewed about, and indeed there is scarcely a gentleman's seat, within many miles, respecting which we have not received similar disastrous intelligence. We fear that throughout the country districts much distress and suffering will be experienced by the poorer classes, especially in consequence of the havoc which this frightful tempest cannot fail to have made amongst their habitations. ...

In the next edition, three days later, there was more news:

Belfast News-Letter, Friday 11 January 1839, page 2

ADDITIONAL PARTICULARS RESPECTING THE LATE STORM.

In our last number we gave a tolerably ample list of casualties occasioned by the storm of Sunday night, but still it was far from comprising the actual damage done. We now supply some additional details.

BELFAST — The chimney of the Phoenix Foundry, belonging to Messrs. Holden and Pearce, was blown down destroying in its fall a considerable portion of the adjoining smiths' shops. The chimney of the Glass-house in Ballymacarrett, the property of Mr. John Kane, was also thrown down, and did some damage to Mr. Lemon's rope-walk.

SAINTFIELD — The entire top of Mr. McBurney's windmill was carried away, and the iron shaft broken. Great devastation has also taken place throughout the neighbourhood.

LISBURN — Immense injury has been done here, and the road, for a considerable distance, was rendered impassable, from the number of fallen trees with which it was covered. Two large trees, probably 200 years old, and which have been long known as the "Two Sisters", were torn up by the roots.

ISLANDMAGEE — Here the devastation has been almost universal, scarcely a house having escaped, while numerous stacks of grain have been carried away into the sea. In Larne lough five coasting vessels have been either sunk or wrecked. A subscription has been set on foot for the relief of the poor sufferers in Islandmagee, whose case is truly deplorable.

KIRKCUBBIN, PORTAFERRY, &c. — At the latter place the shipping has suffered severely, the small craft having been nearly all destroyed, the *Helen* of Belfast is on shore in Ballyhenry Bay. Echlenville House, near Kirkcubbin, has been greatly damaged, and the family obliged to leave it.

LURGAN — Here also sad havoc has been committed — The spire of the Church has been overthrown, the roof driven in, the windows smashed, and the whole edifice is nearly a wreck.

BALLYMENA — Amongst other casualties here the chimney of the Messrs. Davison's flax mill has been blown down, breaking through their gas works in its fall.

DRAPERSTOWN (COUNTY DERRY) — A correspondent informs us, that at Draperstown the destruction caused by the storm was frightful. The ridges of three of the best houses in the village were entirely blown down, and even the elegant Market-house lately erected by the Drapers' Company was considerably injured. Scarcely a house escaped, and numerous stacks of hay and oats were entirely carried away. Happily no lives were lost, but the Parish Church is a scene of desolation — the spire is levelled to the ground, the walls are uncovered, and the whole edifice is nearly a mass of ruins.