

In May 1844 Samuel Ussher Roberts was appointed district engineer for the Ardee, Glyde and Fane drainage districts in counties Monaghan, Louth and Meath where he was to have charge of extensive arterial drainage works. Roberts wrote the following letter in relation to the state of persons who worked at digging the arterial drains in the South Monaghan area. On week ending 30th January 1847, Roberts had 20,000 men, women and children at an average cost of 5d. per day, digging drains in most severe weather, in order to improve the land and provide the tenants with employment to sustain themselves.

[Poor Relief Department.]

Drainage Commission Office, Castlebellingham
February 5th, 1847

Barony of Farney, County Monaghan.

WORKS UNDER MR.LABOUCHERE.

I CANNOT describe the poverty and destitution among the people in this barony; unfortunately the works in aid of relief were not commenced until the people were almost starving. Hundreds of them came to work without having tasted food for days before; the result was, they were unable to earn wages capable of supporting themselves, and numbers of them left the employment in despair to go to the poor-house (Carrickmacross Workhouse).

Throughout the whole barony I witnessed the same painful distress.

I found that they were unable to earn wages exceeding 8d. a day at the ordinary and customary prices for task-work in the country; every effort was made to induce them to exert themselves, and rouse their energies, but to no effect. I placed over them the best and most experienced overseers I could obtain, those who had aided in establishing with success the system of task-work in other parts of the country, but their efforts have failed; the men were unable to do more, and after every exertion had been made I found myself obliged to raise the scale of prices, so as to enable them, weak, infirm, and badly fed as they were, to earn wages that would save them and their families from actual starvation. Since then, everything has gone on well; the number of hands has increased to about 4,500 and the people are, generally speaking, industrious.

The works are progressing satisfactorily and well, though we have not experienced that aid or assistance from the proprietors or their agents that might have been expected, and which would have helped us through our difficulties. The class of people employed as stewards or gangers, and recommended by the proprietors, has been found most inefficient, and their inefficiency has of course increased largely the difficulty of controlling so large a work.

Works are now open in upwards of 50 different localities in the barony, so that employment may be said to be at the door of every labourer. Men, infirm and able-bodied, women, and children have been employed, and I do not think relief in the shape of employment could be more effectually afforded. Payments are made once a week. I have divided the barony into four divisions, the pay returns of which terminate on different days; by this means all men are paid a day or two after the week's earnings are due.

S. W. ROBERTS.

Mr. ROBERTS to Mr. MULVANY

Carrickmacross, February 20, 1847

BARONY OF FARNEY, MONAGHAN

THERE is to be a presentment sessions here on the 1st of March; the Rev. Edward McGowan, P.P., with whom you are already acquainted, has, I believe, urged this upon the Government.

It is not difficult to gain information as to the amount of destitution, for it is now becoming very great. Hitherto the extensive employment afforded to men, women, and children, of all ages, secured to each family some means of subsistence; this kept away famine and disease. There are few families in the barony requiring employment who did not receive from 6*d.* to 1*s.* 6*d.* a day for labour. This enabled them to procure turnips, upon which they chiefly live; but upon such food they cannot work, until the last snow, there was not much disease, not much more than in ordinary years; but dysentery is now making its appearance very fast.

Our works are now drawing to a close, and the employment is, of course, becoming limited; the people thrown out of work have no resource whatever; hundreds spend days without food, and in the absence of proper sustenance have recourse to the most unwholesome diet. Their deserted and wretched cabins, their forlorn and distressing look, with pain and sickness so dreadfully depicted in every countenance, is horribly painful to look at; and with all this human misery, there is no person putting his shoulder to the burthen, — no proper efforts are being made to relieve the people. How it will end, God only knows.

The large farmers are tilling their lands, but the smaller are not. In Farney the way the small farmers cultivate their lands is — they and their children carry the manure to the ground in baskets — they then hire horses to plough. I think the proprietors ought now to supply them with means to dig or plough their land, and give them seed, which would ensure the land being tilled; I see no other course that will. I have urged in the strongest manner I could the necessity of looking to these matters in time; but nothing is yet done, and if works are presented for at this approaching sessions, and public employment given to the people in March, Farney is lost.

I find great difficulty in closing the works, that is, making them complete for the exact amount to be expended. This you may conceive when I tell you that there are 75 lots or depots of work in the barony, averaging 120*l.* each.

S. W. ROBERTS.

*Ref: Parliamentary Papers, 8, Sessions 1846, vol. 8.
Courtesy of Dundalk Library*