



# HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

## Athlone's Day of Judgement



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The 1690s was a tumultuous time for Athlone, with the town besieged on two occasions. The warfare left much of Athlone in ruins, especially on the west side which suffered a massive artillery bombardment in 1691. That year, the victorious Williamite army garrisoned the town and Athlone became an important military centre. The Williamites, as we have seen in a previous article, established Athlone barracks and they turned the nearby castle into a storehouse for vast quantities of gunpowder and weapons. This storehouse would be the site of a massive gunpowder explosion in 1697.

### Death and destruction

Such explosions were a regular occurrence across Europe during the period from 1500 to the early 1800s, usually resulting in multiple casualties and widespread destruction. The Swiss city of Basel was rocked by a gunpowder explosion in 1526, as was Luxembourg in 1554, Venice in 1569, London in 1650, and the Dutch cities of Delft in 1654, Maastricht in 1761, and Leiden in 1807.

Ireland was not free from such disasters. In March 1597, the area around Wood Quay and Merchant's Quay in Dublin was devastated by an explosion during the unloading of gunpowder barrels from a boat on the Liffey. The barrels, which were part of a shipment that had been dispatched from the Tower of London, were being stacked on the quayside when the disaster occurred. The cause of the

explosion was never established but it may have been a spark created by a horseshoe striking hard ground near the barrels. Contemporary records state that 126 people were killed in the explosion, although the ultimate death toll was probably higher.

Athlone's entry to this catalogue of calamities arrived on 27 October 1697. An account of the disaster was recorded by Gustavus Hamilton, a major in the Williamite army who had played a prominent role in the 1691 siege. After the siege, he was given the position of governor of Athlone and it is his report, compiled from eyewitness accounts, that forms the basis of the information below.

### Heaven and earth united

Hamilton's eyewitnesses, which included sentries posted at the town gates, later recalled

that a thunderstorm approached Athlone during the early hours of 27 October 1697. About 4am there was a sudden gust of wind, so fierce that the sentry of the town's Dublin gate was forced to briefly abandon his post and seek shelter. The 'violent wind' was accompanied by a 'dreadful shower of rain, as if a whole cloud had fallen on the street'. Witnesses recalled the 'prodigious noise' of this rain and contemporary descriptions suggest that Athlone may have experienced what meteorologists call a wet microburst: a sudden downward burst of air from the base of a thunderstorm which leads to extremely powerful winds at ground level, sometimes exceeding 160 kilometres per hour. A relatively rare occurrence, wet microbursts can release a huge amount



A sketch of Athlone's North Gate.

of precipitation within a few seconds.

The wind soon subsided, as did the rain. A 'terrible clap of thunder' followed, after which

there was silence and 'a thick darkness enveloped' the town for a period of seven or eight minutes. This period of calm was merely the prelude to catastrophe. The night sky was then illuminated by repeated lightning strikes, causing an eyewitness to state that 'Heaven and Earth seemed to be united by the flame'. One witness described a 'fiery cloud' approaching from the north to the sound of 'three claps of terrible thunder'. After seeming to settle above the castle, the cloud unleashed a lightning bolt and 'in a moment after, the magazine took fire'.

### Athlone burns

The magazine contained gunpowder, 220 barrels of musket balls, fuses, hand grenades, and 'great quantities of pick axes, spades, shovels, horseshoes and nails'. All were thrown in the air by the resulting explosion, hurtling through buildings and their inhabitants. Hamilton's report makes clear the horror of the scene: 'The poor inhabitants, who were generally asleep when this tragical scene began, awakened with the different surprising misfortunes that befell them, some finding themselves buried in the ruins of

their own houses, others finding their houses in a flame above their heads, others blown from their beds into the streets, others having their brains knocked out with the fall of stones, and breaking of hand grenades in their houses.'

As the thunderstorm continued overhead, Athlone burned to the ground. The explosion had caused the thatched roofs on many of the town's houses to catch fire and the conflagration quickly grew too large to be contained. Some people escaped from the town while others resorted to prayers. It seemed, as Hamilton's report later stated, as if the 'Day of Judgement' had arrived. When the fires eventually burned themselves out, the surviving townspeople searched through the rubble, looking for survivors. A Mr Dowdell, a shop owner, and a Mr Roe, a town bailiff, were dug out of their demolished homes about six hours after the explosion. Although the two men survived, their spouses had each been killed by falling debris. Those women were two of the seven people who died, while another 36 were injured. Little remained of Athlone town except for a 'few poor cottages' and a multitude of smouldering ruins.

Athlone would recover, although, as historians such as Harman Murtagh have noted, little is known about the process through which the town was rebuilt. Yet the recovery seems to have been well underway 12 years after the explosion. In 1709, a traveller named Samuel Molyneux described Athlone as 'a handsome large town, situated on ye noble river Shannon', even though the scars of the 1697 disaster remained visible. Molyneux described seeing the 'miserable ruins of ye castle, which was some years ago blown up.'



Athlone Castle over a century after the explosion.

