



# HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

## 'Imagination could not paint a scene more appalling'



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The 'Night of the Big Wind', the ferocious storm that struck Ireland during the night of Sunday, January 6, 1839, has become part of Irish folklore, a singular event that could not be forgotten by those who experienced it and whose details were passed from one generation to the next.

According to a study by Met Éireann to mark the 150th anniversary of the storm, there was nothing unusual about the weather in the days before January 6 1839. It was cold and overcast with regular snow showers. The day itself was calm, although people around the country reported that a light breeze sprang up in the late afternoon, accompanied by a noticeable rise in the air temperature.

By evening time, perhaps around 7pm in Athlone, the wind had strengthened to gale force, intensifying thereafter to reach hurricane force. All over the country the same pattern was repeated, with winds strengthening during the evening, developing to hurricane force during the night and finally subsiding before dawn on Monday morning.

### Fanning the flames

Those who experienced the storm later described the incredible noise of the wind, which they likened to that of thousands of artillery guns being fired or an immense and seemingly endless thunderstorm. Not only did that wind level buildings but it sparked fires at locations all over Ireland.

At that time, most rural houses and many urban dwellings had thatched roofs and, especially in places such as Westmeath, turf was the primary source of fuel. That night the storm fanned turf fires in the hearth's of countless homes and the embers were blown into the air, igniting the thatch above. The flames were then driven from one thatched roof to the next and within minutes whole streets

were ablaze.

That was the scene in Athlone, where over 100 houses were destroyed. Contemporary newspapers reported that 'a large range of cottages at either extremity of the town took fire, and in a few moments the entire were totally consumed, and the unfortunate inmates had hardly time to save the clothes which cover them'. Some houses were saved from destruction by the police, under Head Constable Smyth, who 'procured the barrack engine and a company of soldiers' to fight the flames.

In neighbouring Moate, between 60 and 70 houses were burned to the ground, a disaster that would have been even worse but for the actions of town resident Nathan Fallon and his sons (as described in the Dublin Weekly Register newspaper), whose 'unwearied personal exertions, with the active assistance of the police, were the means, under Providence, of preventing the fire which consumed so many houses at both extremities from extending to the remainder of the town'.

### A melancholy sign

Despite the brave efforts of Smyth, Fallon and others, they were overwhelmed by the extraordinary conditions in which they found themselves. Days later, the Dublin Evening Mail said of Athlone: 'The storm of Sunday night last has, perhaps, in no other part of Ireland been more severely felt, or more destructive to life and property, than in this neighbourhood.'

According to the paper, 'vast numbers of the houses have been totally unroofed, or almost stripped of slates and windows'. Other houses had been destroyed by fire and their former occupants congregated in the streets of the town. It was, as the paper reported, a 'melancholy sign to see the poor people still hovering round the wreck of their former dwellings, trying to recover from the burnt pile something of their little property, and without means of subsistence, or a roof to cover them'. Those newly homeless people sought accommodation in 'the few cabins that braved the storm'.

Even substantial buildings such as those in Athlone barracks were



The storm caused immense damage throughout Ireland and on the Irish Sea, where numerous ships were damaged or sunk.

greatly damaged. In the barracks, a sentry box containing an on-duty soldier was ripped from the ground and carried some distance away. It landed face down trapping the soldier inside, although he was later released by his comrades and found to be completely unharmed.

The soldier was doubly lucky since a building adjacent to where the sentry box once stood had collapsed and covered the entire area in rubble. The local British army commander, Major-General William Parker Carroll, had a similarly lucky escape when 'a stack of chimneys' in his headquarters collapsed. Indeed, the Pilot, a Dublin newspaper, described the barracks as 'a complete wreck' that would require 'several thousand pounds' to repair.

Elsewhere in Athlone, according to newspaper reports, the 'two distilleries suffered severely', and the town's 'houses of worship' were 'in a very sorry plight'. Another large building, which was built as a cholera hospital but which had been turned into warehouse for corn, was knocked to the ground after its roof and front wall were blown into the canal.

Throughout the area, roads were blocked by fallen trees and in the fields around the town, as elsewhere, farm animals lay dead and injured.

### A series of tragedies

According to contemporaries, Moate was particularly unfortunate. One newspaper, the Drogheda Journal, reported: 'Imagination could not paint a scene more appalling than Moate presented'.

A report from the Pilot, printed only two days after the storm subsided, provided the unhappy details: 'I find that the accounts which I sent you yesterday from Moate have not been exaggerated.

The condition of the poor people whose houses have been burnt is deplorable beyond description. Many of them were this morning out in the snow without a place to put their heads in. The farmers and gentlemen in the neighbourhood whose out-offices have not been blown down, have most humanely afforded a temporary shelter to those poor creatures.'

Apart from Athlone and Moate, many Midland towns experienced widespread fires: Kibbegan, Kells, Naas, Slane, Berr

and Portlaoise, among others. Some Midland towns, such as Mullingar, avoided major fires but nevertheless suffered extensive destruction, with homes and businesses levelled by the fierce winds. Numerous estate houses were damaged and the Northern Whig newspaper reported that 15,000 trees 'were blown down in Lord Charleville's demesne, near Tullamore'.

At Moydrum Castle, near Athlone, the 78-year-old Lord Castlemaine (at least according to some newspaper reports) fastening his bedroom window when the wind hurled him 'so violently upon his back that he instantly expired'.

For thousands of Irish families, the 'Night of the Big Wind' was a night of tragedy. Estimates of the number of people killed during the storm range from 200 to 400. In Moate, for example, a local committee was formed to raise funds for 'the relief of the poor who suffered from the dreadful storm and fire'.

That committee was still active two months later, giving an indication of the damage done to the town and a sense of the extraordinary destruction that one immense storm visited upon the country.

