



DID YOU KNOW?

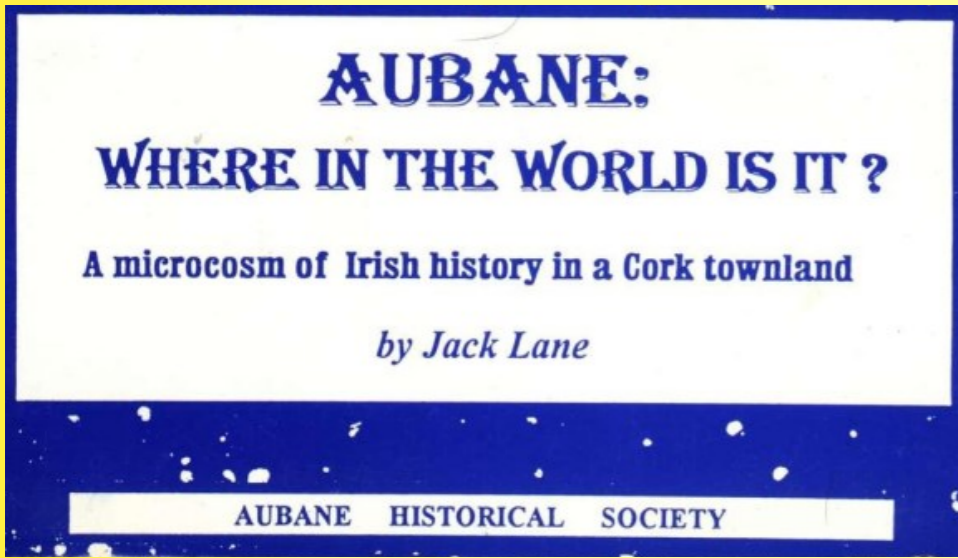
JOHN MURPHY CASTLEISLAND & THE BUTTER ROAD



History Comes Alive!

The history and importance of the Butter Road and John Murphy is fantastic. How better can the story involving John Murphy be told than simply refer to the experts - this history was researched and has been presented by the Aubane Historical Society Millstreet in its absolutely brilliant publication: 'Aubane: Where In The World Is It?' by Jack Lane. We reproduce here, aspects of this lovely work by Jack Lane which relate to John Murphy and the Butter Road. Thank you Jack.

Extracts From 'Aubane: Where In The World Is It?' by Jack Lane.



One of the most important pieces of construction in Cork & Kerry was the building in the mid 18th century of the 'Straight Road', or the 'Old Kerry Road', now better known as the 'Butter Road,'

John Murphy from Castleisland had to raise his own finance having been awarded the contract for the Butter Road. He had hoped that he would recoup it all and eventually make a profit by making it a toll road. But the road brought financial ruin for Murphy, resulting in debts of over four thousand pounds. Nobody knows for certain what really happened to him afterwards. While he raised the money with the gentry acting as trustees, he lost heavily on the project - as much as £4,000, a huge amount in the 1700s. The irony is that when the road was constructed the Cork Butter Exchange was not yet in existence. When it did, and the road tolls might have saved him, Murphy was already in deep financial trouble. It is thought that Murphy could have saved himself from financial ruin if he had begun his roadbuilding just twenty years later.

It is easy to take roads for granted. They rarely get the adulation and praise that other structures get despite the fact that their building and their usefulness is as worthy of admiration as many other human constructions. The Butter Road has had an enormous impact on the developing prosperity of Cork & Kerry, and all along its route also and it has been there for so long, and is so much part of the scenery, that it is very easily taken for granted. But when one considers the route and the time it was built; it is remarkable in many ways. It was one of the first planned and properly built roads in the country, as opposed to roads that simply developed from paths, tracks, etc It was built as a Turnpike Road, which was a new method adopted by the Irish Parliament after 1729. These roads were usually organised and constructed by the local gentry who collected tolls to meet the cost. This road was unusual in that all the construction and all the financing was carried out by an 'ordinary,' but extraordinary, individual named John Murphy from Castleisland.



The gentry reckoned they could not do it themselves, that it was too big a project. They acted as Trustees and entrusted Murphy with the work. He raised all the money to build it and expected to get it back from the tolls he organised on it. It was a risky business and so it proved for Mr Murphy. But before dealing with his problems it is useful to get an idea of the enormity of what he did. It is fortunate that, as this was one of the first ventures of its kind, there was very detailed Act of Parliament passed that spelt out the contract with Murphy in great detail. This Act gives us a good description of what he undertook and achieved. Murphy practically built 56 miles of road, which included the building of all the bridges on it: 9 large ones, of which that in Aubane would be an example, and 15 small ones. He estimated that it would take him 8 years to build and all without any mechanical help. We could also judge his achievement by considering that it took nearly another 250 years before a comparable road was built from Cork to Mallow. Murphy built many others straight roads in Kerry and was recognised as something of a genius in his time. The historian of Cork and Kerry, Charles Smith, speaks of: "...Mr Murphy, a man, who by the meer dint of genius hath extremely well executed several new roads here, and taught others to do the like, and carry them on through very difficult and almost impracticable bogs and mountains." He was more than likely a Catholic who became a Protestant (or went through the motions as many did to survive), as no Catholic could have got the support he had from the Protestant gentry of the day, when the Penal laws were at their height. The Penal Laws sought to wipe out the Irish Catholics. It's called genocide these days and were argued for in the theologically correct jargon of the day. A major part of the laws was to systematically deprive Catholics of landed property, which was considered the only real wealth at the time. This was therefore a major way to eliminate a people. One of the consequences was that some Catholics developed more unorthodox and novel ways of making money and making money from road tolls, or toll farming, was certainly the type of business that would have attracted entrepreneurial Catholics whether calling themselves Protestants or not.

The idea of a straight road was very revolutionary and in many ways was not sensible or economical in this part of the country, certainly from a construction point of view. It would have made more sense in many ways to take more circuitous routes. This type of road only made real sense with the mechanised travel of the 20th century. So Murphy was very ahead of his time. Extracts from the proposal for the Bill in the Irish Parliament in February 1747 are on the next section below. The second Bill on the Order paper that day in February 1747 is also worth noting and very typical of the time, more typical than the road Bill. It is an example of the Penal Laws in this case to drive Catholics out of places of employment. The Members of the Ascendancy Parliament in Dublin were as conscientious in this as they were in the building of the road and they certainly spent more time on such efforts to eliminate the Irish Catholics than they did on roadbuilding or any other socially useful activity. And, of course, in this particular case they could not even build the road themselves. The road was built as the route from Cork city, the second city in the country, to facilitate travel and communication with the developing Kerry area and, particularly with Killarney, which became famous for its Lakes at this time.

Murphy is the father of Cork-Kerry tourism and travel. It was the straightest route between the two chosen points and the list of Trustees in the Act is a Who's Who of the Cork and Kerry gentry of the day, who sanctioned its construction to service them. The Full Act of Parliament is reproduced in 11 pages (In the Absolutely Brilliant publication 'Aubane: Where In The World Is It?' by Jack Lane) because it describes every aspect of the project in amazing detail and this is unusual. It does not leave a stone unturned, so to speak. It reads like a contract or the completion of a tender. The gentry knew exactly what they wanted from Murphy. The Shannah-Mill referred to is now Rathmore. The reader has to be aware that the letter "s" sometimes closely resembled "f" in the English print then in use. Many of the words are no longer in use because what they describe no longer exists, or rather is no longer in use—the various types of carts, tackling etc. These are described in some detail in order to lay down exactly the tolls that had to be paid and how much and for how long. Murphy could collect them for 61 years from 1st May 1748. Also described are the penalties for trying to fiddle the tolls or taking side roads to avoid payment. All this was punishable by law. Also spelt out are the penalties for those refusing to work on the road if they were obliged to do so. There was an extra toll for people who used young trees as a source of lumber for carts and tackling, to discourage them cutting down these trees. The language is obviously old fashioned and legalistic but clear enough to understand with a little patience.

KEEP CALM AND ADD MORE BUTTER.

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WHO WAS JOHN MURPHY?

There are some glimpses of Murphy, and his sons in the Kenmare Manuscripts. The first was on 3rd May, 1727 in an account concerning the building of some wall and buildings where he is described as having done all the specified work and was a "very honest, industrious man of very good performance and esteem in his county". Viscount Kenmare, Valentine Brown, describes his involvement in the road, but despite that he was not one of the trustees, no doubt because he was a Catholic. In describing the situation at Knockaninane he says: "At my coming of age in 1748 I found most part of this estate a great dreary waste without a passable road in it, limestone in the mountains but no way of coming at it and the whole in a state of nature without any attempt at improvement. I first prevailed on the gentlemen of the county to apply for a turnpike road to Cork and lent the money to pay for passing the bill to Murphy the undertaker which road will be of utmost service to this country. I next offered 'præmiums' in imitation of those of the Dublin Society for ditching, draining and planting." He refers to Murphy on many occasions, but none of them favourably, describing him and his family as rogues and knaves in that they took advantage of his public spirit to get cheaply rented land from him and were not very good at paying what they owed. They used the building of the road to excuse non-payment of rent on more than one occasion as Kenmare describes about a farm at Knocknacarra: "This was in my father's time part of a grand lease of several denominations called, Knocacapul, Gullane, etc., set to one Mahony and on the expiration rose amazingly and was set to Hum. Moynahan, of Rathbeg, and this part on' to Morto, son of John Murphy.

The pretence for him taking this at £42 and receivers fees was that as he was employed by his father in executing the turnpike to Cork and he represented they could not proceed on the line from Killarney to Millstreet without some land to keep their horses and people on. My zeal for the road was such that I accommodated them with this at said rent and with another large division at Knocknaseed at as reasonable a one; and the return I met with for it was their running in arrear with me for near £300, which I was obliged to take in oats, potatoes, etc., as they were a parcel of beggars. His father-in law, Moynahan of Rathbeg, has now an assignment of his farm and pays the rent punctually, but I insert this memorandum as one of the many knaveries practised on me by John Murphy and his children." Kenmare describes "being vilely imposed upon by John Murphy", who persuaded him to rent land cheaply at Kilbreammore and Boulecullane on the promise of him setting up a linen manufacturing and bleaching business, which never happened and Kenmare felt "cheated and disappointed" and describes Murphy as a "rogue".

The Road opened up many areas, and the populating of the places was no doubt heavily influenced by the opportunities provided, mainly supplying butter to Cork. But there would have been a lot of other trade as well. That included robbery and mugging by some famous highwaymen in the mountain areas of the road. The most famous of these was Simon Browne who lived just beyond the Kerry man's Table in the townland of I vale across the road from John Buckley's house. An ancestor of Mick "Johnny" Kelleher (a great grandfather of Johnny Kelleher born in 1855) was denied absolution for 7 years for not testifying against Browne. One thing this kind of robbery means is that there was a cash economy, though in a restricted sense. Although limited, this was important when it came to the Famine. The Road became the central economic focus of the area, as the river would have been centuries earlier, and it was to the area what railways and airports were to other areas later, a great means of communication and transport, and you can't get far without that.

The Butter Road is a Road with a very human history, from its very construction, as it may have killed the man who built it. To its thousands of traders and travellers, it retains its human scale and there is no reason why its future cannot be as great and as useful as its past to locals and visitors alike. Its basic purpose as the most straightforward way to get from Cork City to Killarney and Tralee still applies as it did over 250 years ago.

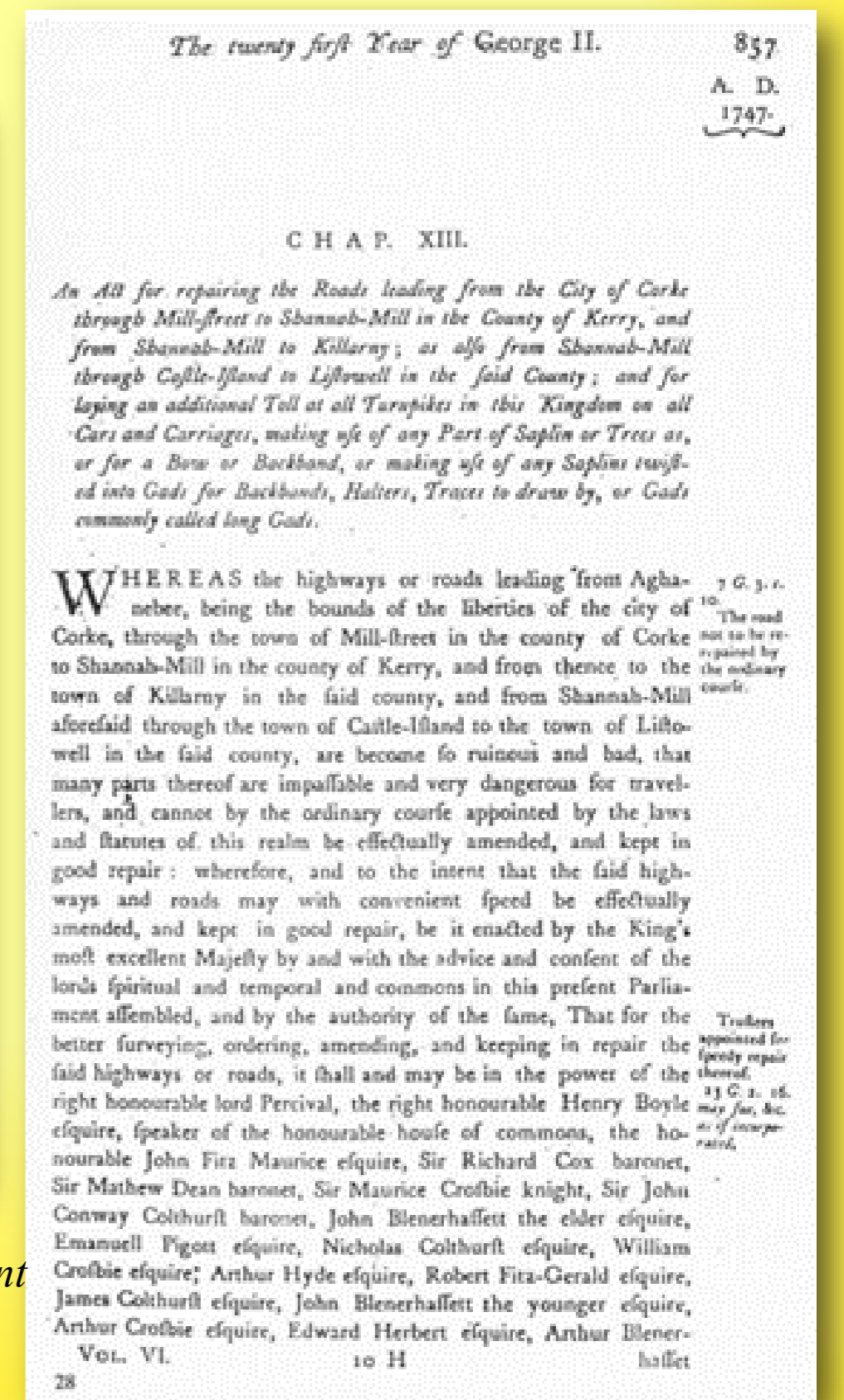
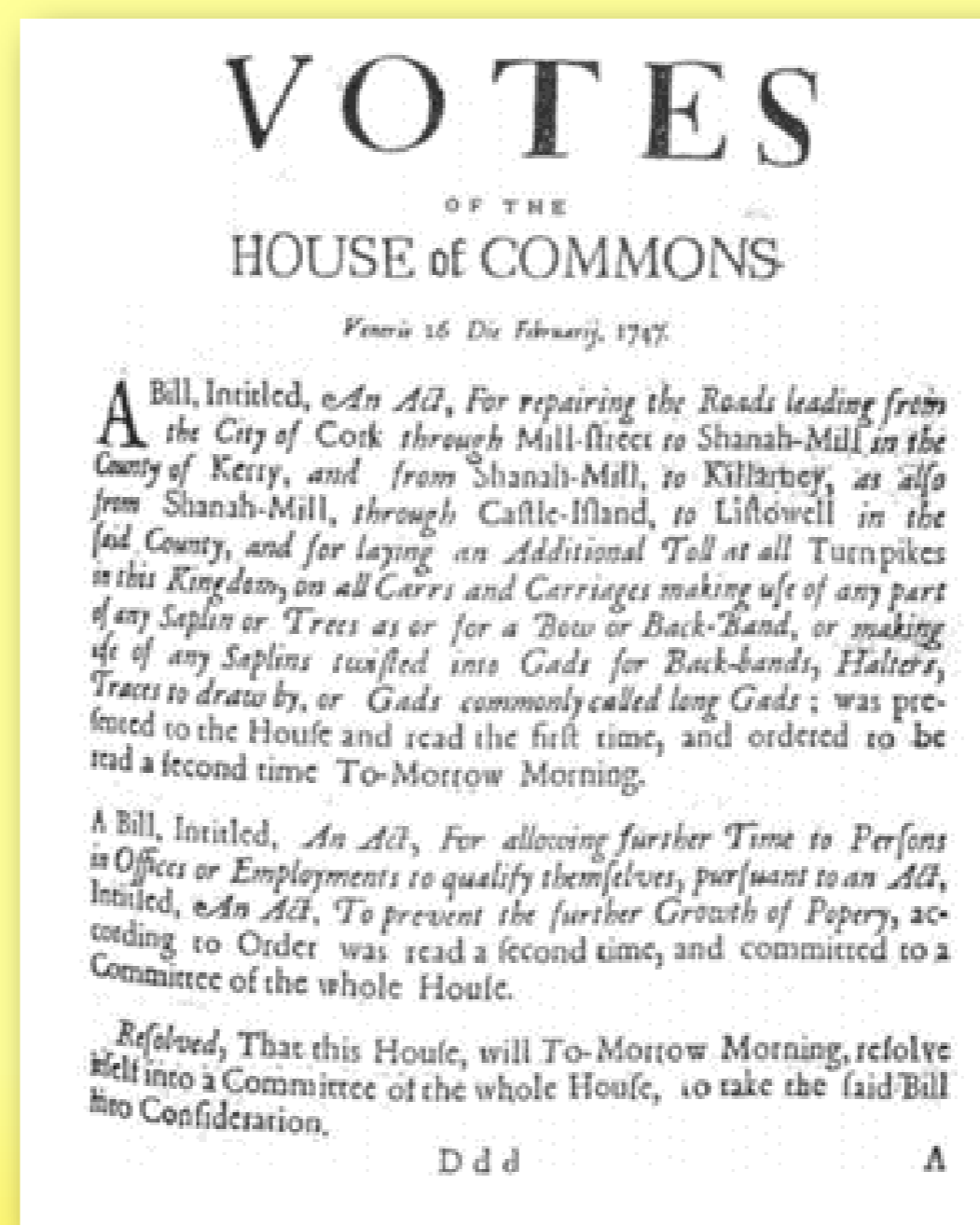
In fact the Road was really the first Cork-Kerry tourism project and John Murphy could be credited with being the founder of the tourist industry for the South of Ireland.



THE CORKMAN'S CHAIR & THE KERRYMAN'S TABLE

As a result of the improvement in the Road in the 1990s we have a monument to Corkmen in the discovery of a Corkman's Chair, which complements perfectly the Kerryman's Table, a short distance away. What could be more appropriate objects to symbolise the very basic purpose of the road, to join Cork and Kerry! Despite all that has happened during the period, the Road has done this job admirably for over 250 years and it was very appropriate indeed that its 250th anniversary was celebrated so well in 1998.

ACT OF PARLIAMENT 1747



Two pages of the Act here - The Full Act of Parliament is reproduced in 11 pages in the publication: 'Aubane: Where In The World Is It?' by Jack Lane)