Charlton’s Endowment Charitable Trust Fund Marriage Certificates

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One of the lesser-known resources in Irish genealogy is ‘Charlton’s Charity’. In essence (although the terms changed over the years) this was a trust fund set up by a wealthy landowner which would give a donation to the children of working class Longford & Meath Protestants upon their marriage. This, naturally enough, attracted a lot of attention, and applications had to be accompanied by the sworn details of the marriage and of both spouses’ parentage, which can prove invaluable if the subject of your research turns up.

The story behind the fund is fairly colourful if true. In the eighteenth century Thomas Charlton (1702-1792) had inherited the large and very wealthy estates of Curratown, Co. Meath, and Moatfarrell, Co. Longford. At the age of 75 Thomas unexpectedly decided to marry, and no-one was more surprised than his extended family who suddenly found their inheritance under threat. On the night before his wedding they made sure Thomas was *“forever prevented from being a father”* (you’ll have to use your imagination). Furious, he declared that the family would never see a penny of his fortune, and that his legacy would instead support the cause of true love. Through his will he put the rents and profits accrued from his estates into a trust fund which would pay a marriage portion (a grant) of £6 16s 6d to ‘the son of any day labourer of Counties Meath and Longford, being at the time of marriage between the ages of 15 and 30, and marrying the daughter of any day labourer of Counties Meath and Longford, being at the time of marriage between the ages of 15 and 40’. The grant depended on a certificate of marriage signed by the Church of Ireland Minister and Church Wardens of the parish where marriage occurred, and only one offspring from each family could receive a payment. Applications had to be submitted by the month of May following the marriage and a list of those who received grants was published each year.

Charlton’s estate was vested to the fund trustees by an Act of Parliament in 1800. Thereafter, the original conditions of the endowment fund were regularly broadened, as the estates proved to have a generous income. The term ‘day labourer’ became stretched to cover a wide variety of occupations, while the value of the grants increased with inflation. The initial understanding was that it was only open to members of the Established Church, though others began to benefit from the fund until a legal challenge in 1837 specifically required membership of the Church of Ireland. From 1855 the sons of Church of Ireland day labourers from adjacent counties were included, once they married the daughters of day labourers from Meath and Longford. After 1895 the marriage portion, which was set to between £10 and £15, was equally divided between Protestant and Roman Catholic applications.

The trust fund itself appears to have survived into the 20th century, though the break-up of landed estates presumably led to its running out of income. The fund documents were transferred to the former Public Records Office in three accessions: Acc. 37 in 1932, Acc. add. 37 in 1939 and Acc. 1/830 in 1949. The marriage certificates are presently indexed in the National Archives Reading Room in the ‘Accessions: Volume 37’ book. They were indexed online at the David Leahy Archive at longfordancestry.net, but that site is no longer active (a useful lesson for those of us who rely on online resources). Many sources give an NAI reference number of ‘M 2800’ for the certificate collection, but this in fact will only get you a single document concerning the administration of the trust fund, not the marriage certificates themselves. There is in fact no actual reference number assigned by the NAI, you need to simply ask for the **‘Charlton’s Endowment Charitable Trust Fund Marriage Certificates’**, which are (as of 2014) kept on **Shelf 2/465/4**. The collection includes three boxes of earlier marriage certificates arranged according to husbands’ surnames – two boxes covering County Longford (‘A-K’ and ‘L-Z’) and one covering County Meath (and possibly other counties?). Later certificates were indexed according to year rather than surname (e.g. 1896-1910, 1896-1921, 1921-1937) and are kept in separate boxes in the collection, while further boxes contain assorted administration documents (e.g. Docs. 1848-1854, Reg. of App. 1877-1895, Rentals 1847-1852, 1876-1894, Chancery).

The Charlton marriage certificates are not very accessible or publicised, and certainly their scope is limited to just midlands Protestants, but with the destruction of many corresponding church registers and with the inclusion of family background details, persevering with these records may be very well rewarded.