

Kilfinane Mill



The lone chimney stack is all that survives from what was formerly the busy Kilfinane Mill complex. In its appraisal of the site NIAHIreland stated 'this chimney serves as a reminder of the industrial heritage of the area.' It also serves to remind us of the significant contribution made by members of the Oliver family to this aspect of Kilfinane's industrial past. In addition, the story of Kilfinane Mill offers some insights into local conditions during the Famine era.

The necessity of providing food lies behind the proverb 'no mill, no meal.' As populations grew so too did the evolution of milling. Mankind moved from grinding corn between quern stones to harnessing running water to turn millwheels. The first Irish mill, according to legend, was built on a river at Tara around AD 250 by the High King Cormac mac Airt. The 1851 Census recorded 5,700 millers in Ireland and 240,000 people employed in the milling industry.

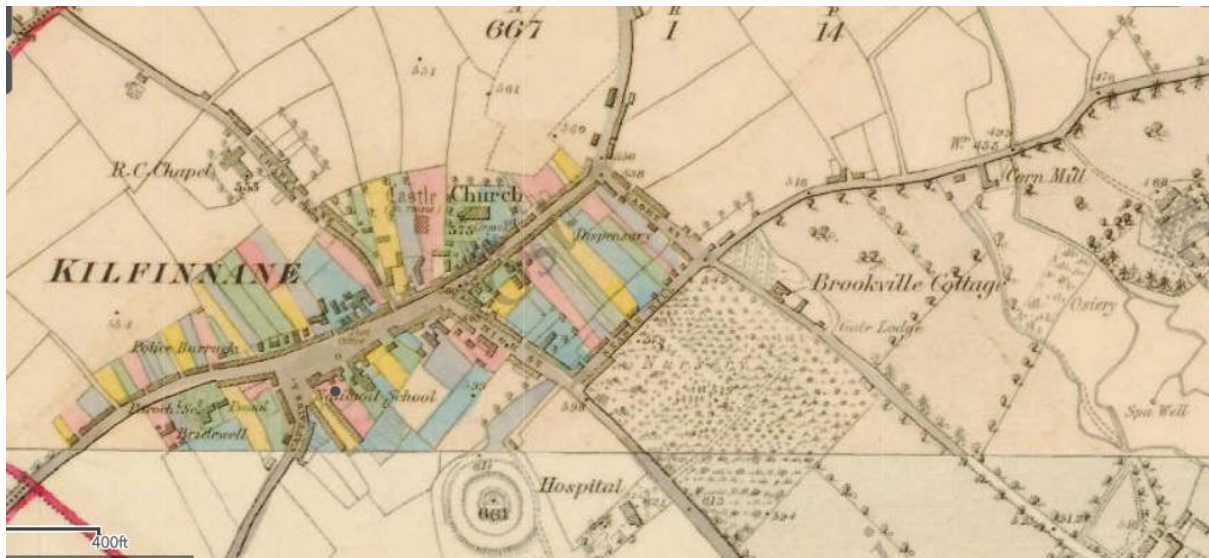
Constructing a mill was a costly business so millers generally came from wealthy backgrounds such as the landlord class, the monasteries, and later successful businessmen. The list of requirements for operating a mill was a long one- waterwheel, mill races, sluices, gearing machinery and millstones. Buildings were usually at least three stories high with grain stores to hold grain, winnowing fans to clean and sieve grain and flour, kilns to dry grain, lofts to store grain, hoists to lift grain to the top stores, warehouses to hold flour and oatmeal.

Kilfinane Mill was developed during the nineteenth century not only to boost profitability for the owners but also to respond to the needs of the tenants on the Castle Oliver estate. Initially it was a centre where oats were ground and flour was milled but in time, as will be shown, the activities extended to the scutching of flax, weaving of tweed and sawing of timber. As such it also developed into an important trading centre for local communities in the hinterland of Kilfinane.

It is possible that an earlier mill was located on this site in Kilfinane but the NIAHIreland record states that the nineteenth century structure was erected around 1790-1800. However, little is known of the business of the mill before 1837. In that year the English surveyor, Samuel Lewis, visited Kilfinane and wrote that 'not far from the town are oatmills'. Further evidence of the existence of a Corn Mill can be seen in the earliest Ordnance Survey map. From an examination of the map the modest nature of the enterprise is evident.

The Ladies

In 1843, following the death of their father, Elizabeth and Mary Isabella Oliver Gascoigne became the owners of the Castle Oliver estate which included all of Kilfinane town and much of the surrounding district, including the Mill. Although they mainly resided on their Yorkshire estate they visited their Castle Oliver estate regularly and spent a prolonged period here during the famine years. They stayed in Spa Hill House with their cousin, William Oliver, who ran the Castle Oliver estate and Kilfinane Mill. William's parentage is uncertain but it is probable that he was the ladies' first cousin. William Oliver and his wife Prudence had two sons –Richard, born in 1833 and who later became the miller and William Silver, born in 1837, who became a doctor and lived in Canada. *(See memorial plaques in the Old Chapel Rooms, Kilfinane)*



Map of Kilfinane c.1845 showing Corn Mill, Hospital and Dispensary ©OSI

Kilfinane Mill during the Famine

The surviving documents from the Mill relate to the period August 1847 to April 1848 and consist of incomplete sets of daily return docketts, some labour time sheets and a small amount of correspondence. The year 1847 has been described as the bleakest period of the Famine, often referred to as Black 47. Potato blight struck in September 1845. From mid-1847 onwards the British government's response to the crisis was to place the responsibility for coordination of relief on Local Relief Committees (voluntary) with some aid from a Central Relief Committee and to place the financial burden of relief provision on local ratepayers (landlords etc.). The relief works, such as road building etc., which were established in the early period had proven to be highly unsatisfactory. Soup kitchens, the most direct and relatively successful form of relief, were closed abruptly in September 1847. Replacement relief was delayed until November of that year when outdoor relief, in the form of soup kitchens and meal tickets, was introduced but was confined to certain categories of recipients. This delay in the provision of relief combined with the complete failure of the year's potato crop contributed to widespread famine destitution and the spread of fever.

The British government of the time have been severely criticised for continuing to export grain during a famine and to import Indian meal as a food substitute. Indian meal, an imported maize

meal, was used to make stirabout for the starving people in fever hospitals, workhouses and soup kitchens. It was an unfamiliar and a less digestible grain. The records show that a considerable amount of oatmeal left Kilfinane Mill in late 1847 while a large consignment of Indian meal arrived in the town in January 1848. During that month almost six tons of Indian meal was delivered to Kilfinane Mills from Spaight's of Limerick. Meanwhile, oatmeal, which was the main product of the Kilfinane Mill, was regularly sold to Dowling Merchants of Fermoy and Patrick Shehan/Skehan of Mallow. Oatmeal was also delivered to the Corn Exchange in Maylor St. Cork on at least one occasion. It is not clear whether it was sold for export or on the home market but trading at Kilfinane Mill during the period in question was brisk. For some of the population such as farmers who had surplus grain to sell and merchants and millers who could trade as usual times were not so bad at all. But for the poorer, labouring classes the only means of survival was to avail of the charity offered by local relief committees and/or landlord benevolence.

Kilfinane Relief Committee

With regard to relief Kilfinane may have been slightly more fortunate than some other places. The Kilfinane Relief Committee, which encompassed a district covering thirty-three townlands in the parishes of Kilfinane, Glenroe and Ballyorgan, had an able and committed Secretary in the person of Rev George Wren. In his secretarial role Rev. Wren organised and collected a Relief Fund of £368 from the district in 1846 and, on application, received a donation of £240 from the Central Relief Committee (CRC) in Dublin. In his letter of application Rev. Wren appealed to the CRC to respond generously in order to "*quiet the sad foreboding of the people*". (The very long list of contributors, including local merchants and farmers, to the Kilfinane Relief Fund was headed by the Misses Gascoignes who donated £100.) The funds enabled the Kilfinane Relief Committee to set up soup kitchens in the district and to issue meal tickets (to be cashed at the Mill). It is difficult to find records of a similar well-coordinated local relief committee operating in other towns in the locality. This may be due to lack of records rather than lack of efforts. However, the availability of relief in a particular place attracted destitute people from other areas lacking organised relief systems. This highlights a major pitfall in the whole famine relief system.

The Relief Efforts made by the Misses Gascoigne

In many parts of the country the reluctance or the inability of landlords to help their tenants compounded the dire situation for many destitute people. By contrast, the Misses Gascoigne became known for their benevolence during the Famine years. Many of their famine projects followed the model of relief set up by the Quakers in other parts of the country and were organised from Spa Hill and from the Mill.

The original Castle Oliver was in ruins when the Misses Gascoigne inherited the estate from their father in 1843. The construction of the new Castle Oliver coincided with the outbreak of Famine and that project served to provide employment locally from 1846 to 1849. The proto-industries, such as flax-growing, scutching, spinning, weaving, knitting and sewing, which the ladies established, provided families, particularly women, with opportunities to earn supplementary income. The Mill records show that on occasion cuttings were ordered by the Fermoy and Mallow merchants and these were possibly lengths of willow used in basket making and harvested in the osiery on the site. One source stated that the Misses Gascoigne had a mill erected 'to grind corn-free of charge- for tenants.' This may help to explain the reference in the document (Figure 2) to Old Mill and New Mill.

Other efforts made by the sisters included the establishment of a bakery in the basement of Spa Hill House from which loaves of bread were distributed daily. Their soup kitchen in Glenosheen was credited with saving the inhabitants of that area from the worst ravages of the Famine. Their intervention in the area of Martinstown known as the Red Bog was probably too little and too late to save many of the famished and fever-stricken members of that community.

Two Fever Hospitals in Kilfinane in 1847-1848

In spite of the local relief efforts made by various parties famine destitution and famine fever did become widespread in the area. Proof of this lies in the fact that the town had to open a second fever hospital at some point during the crisis.

Fears of a widespread fever epidemic forced the government to enact legislation for the establishment of emergency fever hospitals. These hospitals were completely financed by the local relief committees who were issued with strict operational rules by the Central Board of Health. There had been a fever hospital (now the Barrack) and a dispensary (on Laught St) in Kilfinane since the 1830s. (See Figure 1). We learn from the Mill's daily return docket that by August 1847 an emergency fever hospital had also been established in Ballyroe. This is an indication that the original hospital was unable to cope with the influx of fever-stricken patients.

Ballyroe Fever Hospital may have been an existing building that was converted into a temporary hospital. Alternatively, the Kilfinane Relief Committee may have adopted the plans issued by the Central Board of Health and constructed wooden sheds and bedsteads of a simple and economical design. Each patient had to be provided with a separate bedstead and, on admission, was to receive a straw bed in sacking, two blankets and two sheets, a pillow, a rug and a nightshirt. The straw, sheets and nightshirt were to be changed weekly, or, if soiled. As regards food the daily returns from Kilfinane Mill for the period (August 1847 to April 1848) revealed that quantities of oatmeal and Indian meal were sold to both hospitals on a very regular basis (see example in Figure 2). It is possible to estimate from the total quantities of meal sold to the fever hospitals that at least 200 people were catered for in the hospitals during the period in question.

Meal sold to the local soup kitchens

Further evidence about the levels of relief needed in the area is provided by the records of the quantities of oatmeal and Indian meal which were sold from the Mill to the local soup kitchens on 9 October 1847 and on other dates. For example, a sum of £2-8-8 was spent on two and a half bags of oatmeal for the Kilfinane Soup Kitchen and a sum of £1-13-4 was spent on a bag of Indian meal and a bag of oatmeal for the Ardpatrick Soup Kitchen on 9 October 1847. From the surviving documents it can be concluded that a total of thirty-two hundredweight (two hundred and fifty six stone) of Indian meal and twenty-two and half hundredweight (one hundred and eighty stone) of Indian meal was sold to Kilfinane Soup Kitchen during the months of October and November 1847. Due to the fragmented nature of the surviving records we cannot be certain that the quantities of meal totalled here covers all the grain procured for the relief effort in the area but this amount alone indicates severe levels of hardship.

Total returning for Kilfinane Mills 27th 1847 £2-5-8
 To M. for Drap. Dept. and Bag 1st 11-4
 Kilfinane for Hospital 3rd & meal - 5-0
 Kilfinane for Hospital 2nd & meal - 3-4
 Mr. Davittan 2nd & meal - 3-4
 £4-13-8
 Nov 9th 1847.

Old Mill	New Mill
Mr. O'Grady £-2-11	William O'Kied £-6-3
Patt Sheehan £-4-3	Patt Gallagher £-3-0
John Mulcahy £-2-4	John Huzzey £-6-10
John Staunton £-4-3	Patt Connolly £-3-6
Mr. Laffin £-5-0	£-19-7
Patt Mulcahy £-3-4	2-18-9
John Connolly £-3-9	Total £ 3-18-4
John Meany £-5-0	Mr. Palmer 13-4
Mr. Ryan £-4-10	£-11-0
Edmund Delaney £-3-8	
David Lantton £-3-3	
Mr. Hoyle £-1-4	
John Connolly £-2-9	
James English £-7-1	
£-2-18-9	

Kilfinane Mill daily return docket for 9 October 1847 stating that 3 stone of oatmeal was sold to Ballyroe Fever Hospital and 2 stone of oatmeal was sold to Kilfinane Fever Hospital on that day.

Employment at Kilfinane Mill during October 1847-January 1848

The only records which survive for the employment rate in any of the enterprises at the Mill are those from the Old Mill for various weeks in November and December 1847 and January 1848. (See example in Figure 4). The names of six male employees appear on each of the sheets so it is possible to surmise that they were in constant employment there. They were John Mulcahy, the miller, who earned £0-1-8 per day or ten shillings a week, Patt Sheehan, James Staunton, Michl Cleary, James Huzzy and Thos. Callaghan who each earned £0-0-10 a day or five shillings for a six day week. The millwright, Michl Sullivan, was not employed every week but he earned £0-5-0 a day or one pound and five shillings for five days work. (The millwright, usually a journeyman, was a skilled handicraftsman who installed and maintained the heavy machinery involved in the milling process.) Johanna Mulcahy was also employed for six days of most weeks and she earned sixpence a day which amounted to three shillings a week.

*Labour time employed at Old Mill by
W. Oliver Esq. Week ending Nov. 13th 1847*

<i>John Mulcahy</i>	<i>6 days</i>	<i>£ - 10 -</i>
<i>Peter Shanahan</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>- 5 -</i>
<i>James Shanahan</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>- 5 -</i>
<i>Michael O'Leary</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>- 5 -</i>
<i>James Muzzey</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>- 5 -</i>
<i>Thos. Callaghan</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>- 5 -</i>
<i>Miss Sullivan</i>	<i>5 .. 0 7 1/2</i>	<i>£ - 1 - 5 -</i>
		<i>£ - 3 - 0 -</i>

Labour time employed at Old Mill by W.Oliver Esq. Week ending Nov.13th 1847

Kilfinane Mill in the post-Famine era

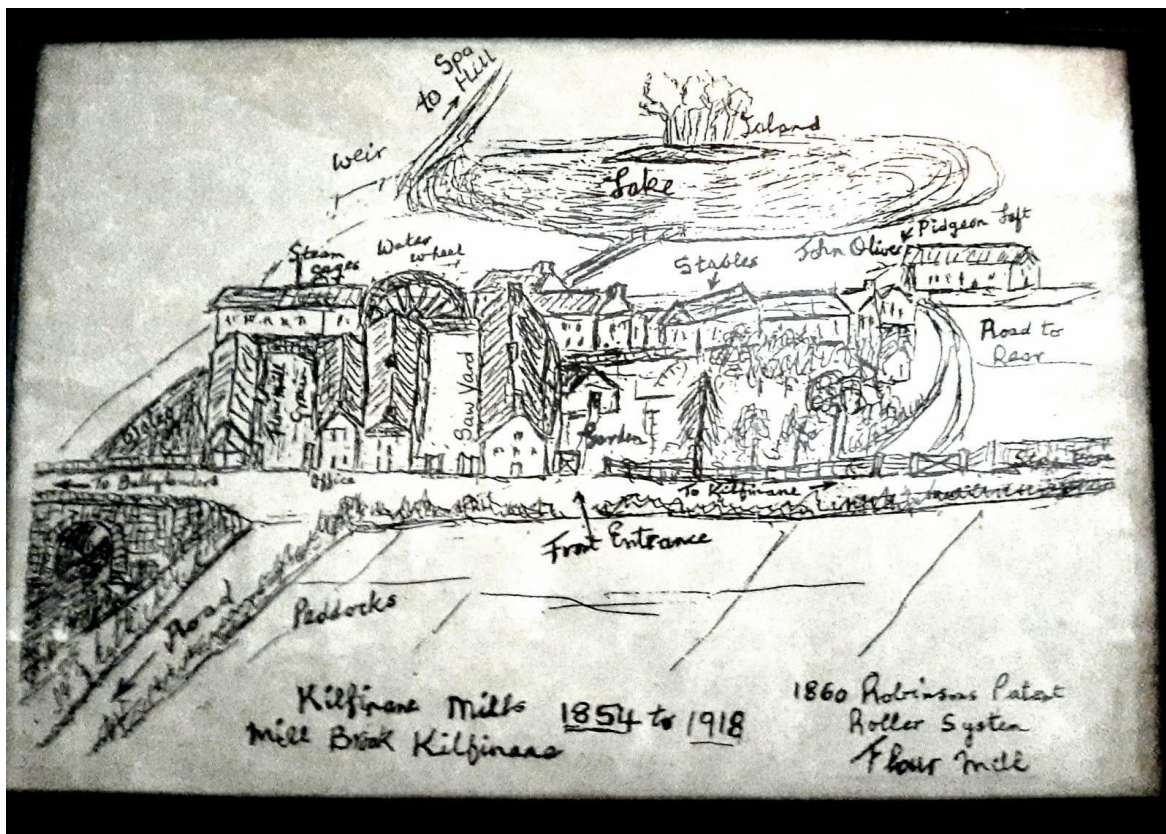
46	George Shoemaker,	Esq., and Miss E. O. Gascoigne,	House, offices, and land,	37 0 10	10 2 0	2 13 0	18 15 0
47	Anne Geoghegan,	Fred. Chas. Trench, Esq., and Miss E. O. Gascoigne,	Land,	2 0 21	1 0 0	—	1 0 0
48	Henry Stark,	Fred. Chas. Trench, Esq., and Miss E. O. Gascoigne,	Land,	5 2 4	3 0 0	—	3 0 0
49	William Leahy,	Fred. Chas. Trench, Esq., and Miss E. O. Gascoigne,	Land,	4 1 29	3 0 0	—	3 0 0
50	a Andrew Chapman,	Fred. Chas. Trench, Esq., and Miss E. O. Gascoigne,	Land,	1 2 33	1 3 0	—	1 3 0
51	a William Oliver, Esq.	Fred. Chas. Trench, Esq., and Miss E. O. Gascoigne,	House, office, and land,	6 1 18	5 0 0	1 5 0	6 5 0
—	b William Oliver, Esq.	Fred. Chas. Trench, Esq., and Miss E. O. Gascoigne,	House, offices, and land,	40 0 39	50 0 0	23 10 0	73 10 0
—	c Fred. Chas. Trench, Esq., and Miss E. O. Gascoigne,	(See also lot 61.)	Corn-mill, kiln, & offices	—	—	20 0 0	20 0 0
—	d Henry Tracy,	William Oliver, Esq.	In fee, . . . }	—	—	17 10 0	17 10 0
52	a } William Oliver, Esq.	Fred. Chas. Trench, Esq., and Miss E. O. Gascoigne,	House and office,	7 2 31	5 12 0	1 10 0	1 10 0
53	n } William Oliver, Esq.	Fred. Chas. Trench, Esq., and Miss E. O. Gascoigne,	Land,	4 1 0	1 8 0	—	7 0 0
			Land,	7 2 21	7 0 0	—	7 0 0

List of enterprises based at the Mill in 1851. (Griffith Valuation at askaboutireland.ie)

By 1851, as well as the corn-mill, kiln and offices, there were also flax, corn and carding mills on the site. In the Griffith Valuation (recorded in 1851) it is shown that William Oliver leased/rented the original corn-mill from the estate and the number of enterprises based at Kilfinane Mill are listed. (In 1851 the estate was divided between the two sisters and their partners. Frederick Charles Trench, mentioned here, was Mary Isabella's fiancé and later her husband.)

The developments at the Mill which began in the 1840s were continued after William Oliver's death in 1863 under the management, and eventually the ownership, of his son, Richard. By 1911 the enterprise had expanded to become a Corn and Sawmill, facilitated by significant hydro-engineering

recalled the bell man at the Mill 'whose bell called the workers at 6.00am and rang out dinner time and supper time.' As well as the Corn and Sawmill the complex grew to include a bakery, a shop and a coal store. According to Jim, while Richard Oliver ran the Mill up to 140 people worked there and on the surrounding land. Daniel F. O' Shaughnessy also claimed that employment opportunities in Kilfinane diminished greatly when the Mill closed. Another person who could recount stories of the prosperous years of the Mill was the late Jim Neville. He wrote about the 'busy queues forming on the three roads at the junction outside the Mill gate, even the policeman directing traffic, and of the crowds of people fishing in the Mill Pond on Sundays.'



Artist's drawing of Kilfinane Mill complex

Richard also inherited Brookville Cottage from his father and this was rented out to various people while the Oliver family lived at Spa Hill or later at Mill House. Richard Oliver married twice. His first wife died soon after the birth of their only son, William. Richard remarried and he and his second wife had four more children; Gus, Richard, John and Evangeline. Richard Oliver died in 1918 and it could be said that the bustling mill died with him.

Richard Oliver's Australian great granddaughter, Kathleen Oliver Munro, contributed an interesting article on the Mill to the Kilfinane Coshlea Historical Journal in 2004. She filled in the details concerning her great grandfather's five children. William, the eldest son and from the first marriage, ran a successful Mill at Buttevant. Of the second family three members emigrated and only John remained in Ireland, living at the Mill, until his death in 1932. Kathleen attributed the demise of the mill after Richard's death to a combination of factors; lack of modernisation in the twentieth century,

family disagreements based on political differences and lack of business acumen among the next generation. Certainly indecision or perhaps even disagreement is evident from what followed Richard's death.

Kilfinane Mill for Sale

KILFINANE, CO. LIMERICK.
ATTRACTIVE SALE BY AUCTION
OF
LAND, MILLS, TWO RESIDENCES,
HELD IN FEE-SIMPLE, FREE OF RENT.

I AM authorized with instructions from the Representatives of Richard Oliver, Esq. (deceased), to **SELL BY AUCTION, ON THE PREMISES, AT KILFINANE, ON TUESDAY, 28th DAY OF AUGUST, 1923,** at the Hour of One o'clock (Old Time), all That and Those **THAT PART OF THE LANDS OF KILFINANE**, containing 11 acres 3 roods and 27 perches, Statute Measure, or thereabouts, held in Fee-simple, Free of Rent for Ever, together with Corn and Meal Grinding, Flour and Saw Mills (Water Power); also two splendid Residences known as "Mill House" and "Brookville Cottage," both spacious and in thorough repair, and most picturequely situated.

This Sale offers to the public a unique opportunity of acquiring a most valuable interest in Rent Free Property with unmistakable facilities for developing a lucrative business.

The Mills are fully equipped with all the necessary Machinery for Corn and Meal Grinding, Flour Production, and Sawing Timber of every class.

The Residences are comfortable, substantial, commodious structures, with neat, productive gardens attached.

The Vendor may elect to dispose of the Property in one or two Lots.

Purchaser, on being declared, to pay one-fourth of Purchase as Deposit, together with Five per Cent. Auctioneer's Fees.

Further particulars and Conditions of Sale from:-

ROGER FOX, Esq., Solicitor, Kilmallock; or
J. F. O'HURLEY, M.I.A.A.,
KILFINANE.

[Sale Notice for Kilfinane Mill, Lands and two residences in the Irish Independent 11 August 1923 ©INA](#)

From 1919 onwards the representatives of the late Richard Oliver placed 'Kilfinane Mill For Sale' notices in the national newspapers on at least five different occasions but these were always followed by a 'Business as usual at Kilfinane Mill' notice. Either a buyer could not be found or the vendors could not agree on a sale. When Limerick County Council pursued William Oliver through the courts in 1929 for non-payment of poor rates on the Kilfinane Mill premises he claimed that he was not in occupation since December 1921 when he 'received a letter from the representatives of the late Richard Oliver which determined his tenancy.' It can be concluded that family relationships were not amicable after the death of Richard Oliver. Brookville Cottage was sold in 1923 but the Mill remained unsold for many more years and began a slow decline.

Daniel F. O'Shaughnessy reopened the Mill on a limited scale during the Second World War. A notice in the Limerick Leader on 19 December 1942 announced that Kilfinane Mills had reopened for making flour under the patent roller system and advertised that 'all wheat kiln dried and cleaned.' On 26 January 1943 it was announced in the Irish Examiner that Kilfinane Mills (Olivers' Mills) were in 'Full Swing.' The Compulsory Tillage Scheme was in operation at this time so wheat or oat production formed part of the agricultural output of every farm and the services of the local mill were required. However, disaster struck on 19 April 1944 when a section of the Mill was destroyed by fire.

The End of an Era

|| Mill Fire Damage ||

When at about midnight Mr. C. Kelly, feather merchant, Kilfinane, Co. Limerick, noticed the Kilfinane Flour and Saw Mills on fire, he raised the alarm, and gárdaí and civilians hurried to the scene.

The oatmeal section, blazing furiously, had to be allowed to burn itself out as the equipment and fire-fighting organisation were insufficient to cope with the fire.

Mr. E. F. O'Shaughnessy, owner of the mill, his brother, John, and Henry Downes forced an entrance at the rear and with buckets of water prevented the fire going through a connecting door to the flour-milling section, thus saving that part of the building and valuable machinery.

[Report in the Irish Press on 19 April 1944 ©INA](#)

It is not clear if the Mill ever became operational after this disaster. It is very likely that terminal decline began to set in because ten years later a notice was placed in the Irish Examiner announcing a demolition sale. The vendor was Richard Oliver whose grandfather, also Richard Oliver, had spent his lifetime developing the Mill.

Irish Examiner 1841-current, 23.01.1954, page 4

DEMOLITION SALE.

OLIVERS MILL, KILFINANE.

Timber, Slates, Stones, Bricks, Etc., in Suitable Lots.

In suitable lots. Also 6 acres 1 rood 25 perches of Freehold Land. Statute Measure, more or less, for sale by Auction on the Premises on Wednesday, February 10th, 1954, at 1 p.m. Vendor: Richard Oliver Esq.

Further particulars and conditions of sale from:—

— ROGER FOX & CO., Solicitors,
Kilmallock; or Auctioneers.

Sale by Auction at the Salesroom, Kilfinane, on Wednesday, February 3rd, at 2 p.m., 50 Acres Grazing, watered and fenced, in one or two lots, at Island Dromach, Knocklong. Vendor: Mrs. Johanna Lehane.

**J. F. O'HURLEY & SON, Auctioneers,
Kilfinane.**

[Announcement of Demolition Sale of Olivers' Mill on 23 January 1954 in the Irish Examiner ©INA](#)

The story of Kilfinane Mill reveals an industry with a rich history which had a very significant social and economic impact on the life of the local community through the changing decades of the nineteenth century. Clearly, the demolition sale marked the end of an era in the history of Kilfinane.

The information in this article was sourced from OS historic maps, Famine records from the National Archives, the Castle Oliver papers in NLI and Leeds Archive, newspaper reports, old photographs and local knowledge together with a small file of original Mill documents dating from late 1847 and early 1848.

Further reading: Olivers' Mill by Jim Neville and The Demise of the Kilfinane Mill by Kathleen Oliver Munro in Kilfinane Coshlea Historical Journal Vol.3 2005 pps 29-36.

Photographs courtesy of Grace O'Connor, Pat and Nora O'Shaughnessy and James O'Brien.