

the **Iverk** SHOW

The Iverk Show History

Summary of Part One - 1825 to 1875



The Iverk Show will celebrate 200 years in 2026 since the first show in 1826. To help celebrate the occasion the committee are putting together the details of its history. The details are mainly obtained from the annual newspaper reports of the show as found in the Irish Newspaper Archives.

The committee decided to complete the report in four sections each of fifty years. The following is a summary of the first fifty years i.e., 1825 to 1875.

The Iverk Farming Society was founded by John William Ponsonby, Viscount Duncannon in 1825. On the death of his father, the 3rd Earl, John William became the 4th Earl of Bessborough in 1844.

On his death in 1847 his son John George Brabazon Ponsonby, became the 5th Earl of Bessborough until his death in 1880.

4th Earl of Bessborough



The **Iverk Farming Society** was formed on October 24th 1825 in Anthony's Inn in Piltown, County Kilkenny.

It is clear from the newspaper reports of the number and type of prizes / premiums offered that the aim of the Society was to improve the lives of everyone in the Barony of Iverk and in the wider Bessborough estate. The aims were achieved by giving prizes at an annual show / exhibition of produce and by giving premiums for improvements in farming and living standards.

The improvement in farming methods and efficiency that ensued are said to have had a beneficial influence on the effects of the Irish Famine in the locality in the 1840s.

The Iverk Farming Society organised an annual show / exhibition in the grounds of the Bessborough Demesne, Piltown, County Kilkenny. This was usually held in October. For the first fifty years a show was held annually.

Bessborough House



The barony was divided into districts. There was the Mountain District and the Lowland District. In some years the Lowland District was divided into two, Lowland District No. 1 and Lowland District No. 2. There were separate classes, prizes and premiums for each district.

The prize list was divided into a number of sections. There were separate classes for gentlemen, farmers, cottagers, labourers, mechanics and school boys from the local National Schools. There were some 'open' classes in which anyone could compete.

The prizes were either a medal - first or second class –

money or furniture to the value of the prize money. In 1828, the total prize money allocated was £29 with only £20 paid out as some classes had no entries. As well as prizes and premiums given by the Iverk Farming Society, the Royal Agricultural Improvement Society gave premiums. For example, in 1844 they gave the Iverk Farming Society £10 and three medals. They gave a premium to working farmers living principally by husbandry, whose holdings was valued by the government valuation under £100 per annum.

In the 1860s, the Earl of Bessborough, distributed £20 given by the Irish Peasantry Society of London to working farmers living principally by husbandry, and to cottagers, in addition to the Iverk Farming Society's premium.

Annually there were classes for stock (cattle), sheep, swine, fowl, green crops, butter, implements, linen, flannel and frieze. There is a mention of a poor horse class in 1837 but no other results are recorded until 1868.

The prizes for livestock were mainly given for breeding animals - the best bull, or cow in calf or in milk; the best heifer; the best boar, or sow with a litter; the best ram, or pen of five breeding ewes; a cock and two hens.

In 1870 the committee excluded horned stock from the yard because of the presence of a lung disease in the district. In 1875 there were no cattle classes due to Foot and Mouth disease.

The Prize List

The prize list varied for year to year but in the main the following list represents most years.

Cattle classes. Some of the terminology used in the class title are interesting. For example, the best 'description' of a milk cow, or for the best bull or ram in the opinion of the judges a 'thoroughbred' animal.

There were classes for the best young bull, best older bull and the best bull in the yard. For the best cow in calf or in milk. The best two-year-old, yearling or weanling heifer. For the best bull to have served 20 cows, the property of a resident farmer

Sheep classes. The classes included the best ram, best breeding ewe, ewe lamb or pen of five or six breeding ewes

Swine classes. There were classes for the best boar not less than nine months old and the best sow and litter of not less than six pigs and not more than two months old.

Fowl classes. Classes for the best lot of fowls of a superior breed, for the best two couple of turkeys, for the best gander and two geese, for the best cock and two hens and for the best drake and two ducks.

Butter classes. Included were classes for the best firkin, cool or tub of butter, not less than 20lbs weight prepared for the English market.

Green crops classes. The green crops included classes for turnips, mangold wurzel, parsnips and carrots cultivated in the field, cabbage, onions and beans. Rape could be transplanted or sown. The best crop of red clover or other artificial herbage used for soiling was encouraged. For the best crop of flax.

Labourer. To the labourer who spent the longest time with his master, and produced the best character.

Implements. The display of implements always generated a lot of interest from the crowd. In 1828 the show of implements got widespread coverage.

There were prizes for the farmer in the barony who showed the best-appointed plough, harness and horse, all his own property. A class for the mechanic, resident in the barony, and having been resident for three months previous, who showed the best made iron plough, of his own manufacture. For the best made wooden plough, on the same terms. For the best made tumbling cart. In 1837 the implements were remarkably good, the iron plough, in particular, the work of Thomas Kavanagh, of Tubrid, excited universal admiration.

In 1839 the exhibition of agricultural implements was very large, and of the very best description, including some novel inventions for sub-soil ploughing.

There was a mowing match for cutting wheat with a scythe.

Challenges.

What is reported as a very important part of the Society's activities were 'Challenges'. Each year members of the Society challenged other members to compete against them the following year. The challenge was accepted by one or more members. On occasions no one took up the challenge. Examples of challenges include, to show a cow, to be milked on the 20th of next May, which will produce a greater quantity of milk than any other in the Barony, for a half a dozen of wine; to show two breeding ewes, two ewe lambs and one ram.

Other examples include, to show a well-bred weight carrying hunter; to show a heifer calf; to show five ewe lambs on the farms of the exhibitors; to show two acres of turnips; to show an acre of drilled minion potatoes against any member of the Iverk Farming Society; to produce the best formed horse-shoe and nails, and the best pared hoof, and to explain the principles on which they were done; to show, at the next autumn meeting, the produce of 20 stone of potatoes, reduced to a state to keep for four years; to produce, on the week previous to the next autumn show, four crops of a four-course rotation cleaner and better than any in the Barony of Iverk, and not less than one acre of each; to produce two heavier stall-fed cows, on the 25th day of next April, having been three months in his or their possession, than any person in the Barony of Iverk.

A prize was generally also offered with each challenge and included a cast of wine, one or more bottles of wine, four shillings or a pound.

A challenge could be a sweepstake. For example, in 1827 a sweepstake for the best half-acre of mangel wurzel, for 4s each, was accepted by Lord Duncannon, Mr Osborne, Silversprings; Mr John Walsh, Fanningstown; Mr Henry Edward Briscoe, Cloncunmy; Mr Roberts and Mr McCausland

Premiums.

In order to help and encourage improvements in farming in the district Premium were offered by the Society.

For example, a premium would be available for the best farm of mixed husbandry, which with the dwelling-house, offices, fences, shall be in the best order, or a premium for the greatest number of bee hives kept by a cottager,

Other examples include, premiums for the best acre of drilled potatoes; for the greatest portion of ground dug with a spade on a farm not exceeding five Irish acres, no horses to be kept by the said person; for the best managed farm; for best new dairy; for the best piece of linen yarn grown and manufactured in the area; for the best acre of English red clover, to be cut and soiled

Premiums were available to the cottagers who had the neatest kept flower garden or for a neat, clean cottage, with a well-enclosed garden, not kept for the accommodation of lodgers – the inhabitants not holding above five acres

An interesting and unusual premium was offered for the best kept heap of manure made on the farm by house-feeding, and in proportion to its size.

In the early 1850's the Earl and Countess offered premiums. For example, the Earl offered premiums for the best managed farm of between twenty and fifty acres, or for the best farm of five to fifty acres, or for the best cultivated garden containing the greatest variety of green crops.

The Countess offered premiums for the best new dairy with a floor and ventilation; the best kept dairy; the best linen yarn, flannel or frieze; for the neatest and best kept cottage, with a plot of ground attached, not more than half a statute acre; for the best managed farm of not less than 10 acres, with house and offices suited thereto; for the best linen yarn, grown in the district; for the neatest and best kept cottage; for gardens attached to neat and orderly cottages, with holdings not amounting to one acre; for the best cultivated garden containing the greatest variety of green crops; for the cleanest cottage, without a garden

To encourage boys to get involved in Agriculture, prizes were given to the boy at the National School who can grow the best crop of mangolds, turnips, parsnips, carrots, onions and cabbage in the school garden. There were schools in Piltown, Owing, Templeorum, Boolyglass, Whitchurch, Tobernabrone and Clonmore. As a further incentive there was a prize for the teacher of the best managed school farm. The boys could also bring a selection of the best vegetables to the show for further prizes. The aim was to give the children habits of industry, and make them practical agriculturists from their earliest days.

Show Day

For the first 50 years the annual show was held in early October. On show day judging began at 11am. It appears that the prize winners were not announced until after three o'clock when everyone assembled in front of Anthony's Hotel in the village. From the steps, the Earl and Countess of Bessborough read the list of prize-winners and distributed the prizes and premiums.

The prize giving was followed by dinner in either the Court House, Sessions House or Market House. Up to 200 (1855) people are recorded to have attended. It was generally chaired by the Earl. The dinner was either prepared by Mr Anthony or was brought from Bessborough House. The room was always tastefully decorated with evergreens. Appropriate mottos also

adorned the walls – “ Sloth is the mother of poverty”; “It’s never too late to learn”; “He that tilleth his land, shall have plenty of bread”; “Straight fences, clean crops, thorough drainage, and plenty of manure”; “Good fences, good neighbours”; “Better farm twenty acres then fifty by halves”; “The animal well fed is worth two poorly kept”; “Choose the best seed”; “He who would reap well must sow well”; “One year’s seeding is seven years breeding”. On the door into the dining room was the word “welcome” in bold letters, and over the vice chair was “Erin go Bragh”. The dinner was followed by speeches and toasts

In 1835, Lord Duncannon, in proposing the health the Iverk Farming Society, said “I again meet you upon the anniversary of our establishment, and I have again to congratulate you on the improvements that have taken place in every part of the surrounding district. It is not now as it was in the first year that this society was established, the changes that have occurred are remarkable and every change has been an improvement”.

In 1837 it is reported that a vast extension had taken place in the cultivation of Clover among the smaller farmers of the barony, no less than five hundred and fifty acres having been appropriated to its growth during the last year, and that it appeared to have done more real good, and to have tended more to increase the comforts of the poorer class than any other mode of farming theretofore introduced, as it enabled the cottager to keep a cow on his little holding of perhaps a few perches. The report showed an increase of twenty-one in number of Cottage Premiums, which amounted to eighty. It is reported that the rivalry for these Premiums became so general that the Society was determined that for all future competitors, additional improvements in the management of their garden were necessary.

The first ploughing match organised by the Iverk Farming Society was recorded in 1842. The competition took place on Friday, February 11, in a field given by Joseph Rivers, of Tybroughney Castle. A challenge given by the Portlaw Farming Society, to plough against the Iverk, was ably contested on the part of Portlaw, by the Messrs. Nowlan and by the ploughman of Sir Richard Cox. Dr Briscoe and Mr Falkoner represented Iverk. The challenge was won by Iverk.

In 1844 the attention of the Society was directed to the all-important work of draining, and with the happiest results. The secretary, Mr Elliott reported at the dinner that during the eleven years that he has held the office of secretary, there have been no less than 176 competitors in that class, (all holding very small farms,) who have drained or reclaimed 240 acres 2 roods. The number of candidates progressively increased from seven, in 1833, to thirty in the present year.

At a meeting in County Waterford in 1845, the Iverk Society secretary, Mr Edward Elliott said, “I have reason to believe that the disease exists to an alarming extent in this district: as yet, however, the farmers are not alarmed, for the potato digging has not as yet fully commenced. I have much fear that the extent of the danger will not be discovered until the pits shall have been opened and the damage irremediable.”

In 1849 the first ‘Digging Match’ took place. Piltown was from an early hour the centre of attraction to all the surrounding district, and crowds poured in to witness or take part. The cold fine day was particularly favourable to the operators in this newly introduced feature of the Society’s annual meetings. The Digging Match, which took place in Mr Richardson’s field in Piltown, excited intense interest for its novelty.

At the dinner, Dr Brisco spoke on behalf of the secretary, Mr Elliott He said that the number of competitors on the occasion of their exhibition this year was 225, whilst in any previous year their list had not exceeded 163.....thirty five farmers had been entered as competitors for carrots and parsnips, besides six for cabbage grown in the open field. These might be said to be new crops in that country, and it was thus proved that the farmers were finding other resources for feeding pigs, and discontinuing to lean for support on that broken reed the potato.

At the 1850 the vegetables were extremely large, and excited much attention; but the greatest curiosity of the day was the fine show of poultry. This part of the exhibition was caused by the competition for a very beautiful medal offered by the Countess of Bessborough, and presented by her in person to the winner. This collection of poultry was really very fine, and all were of the purest breed – Malays, Spanish, Columbian, Dorking, Spangled Hamburg, Polish and Aylesbury ducks,

In the early 1850s the Society encouraged the growing of flax, which would employ farmers' wives and daughters. Sheep too were beginning to creep into farming because it was agreed they were a most important stock for the farmer, because they will feed where others would starve.

Also, in the early 1850s members of the Iverk Farming Society were involved in the 'Report of the Commissioners' appointed by the Government to enquire into the conditions of the fairs and markets in Ireland.

In 1853 in the gentlemen's class the silver medal being the first prize, was awarded to George Randall Penrose, of Belvidere, Waterford, for the best lot of Cochin China fowl. The well designed, beautiful silver medal, was on view - as well as the fowl, at the residence of Mr Penrose.

Every year the entire exhibition was held in the demesne of Earl of Bessborough, but in 1870 the horned cattle were separated from the rest and placed in a field nearby. This was owing to the prevalence of the lung disease in the district, which at one time carried off numerous heads of stock. Fortunately, the disease was not widespread, and had totally disappeared from Bessborough, yet there were a few cases still hovering about the district and the proprietors adopted stringent measures to prevent a spread of the disease.

Colonel Stuart and Lord Bessborough "closed the gates" to prevent the cattle of others coming into contact with theirs. It was thought that, in years to come this act might be detrimental to the animal exhibitions, as the best bulls in the barony were inaccessible to the farmers for breeding purposes. There was no competition in the gentlemen's class in stock also due to the lung disease.

Secretary.

The Rev Mr Gustavus H McCausland is mentioned as secretary in 1830 to 1832.

Mr Edward Elliott as secretary from 1834 to 1849 and maybe up to 1861.

Mr John Richardson is recorded as 'acting' secretary in 1861 and secretary from 1863 to 1975.

Mr Edward Briscoe is recorded as **treasurer** in 1830 and 1832.

The following are some general comments recorded in the Show reports

- i. **1829.** *The show took place in the presence of a very large assemblage of persons*
- ii. **1831** *The extreme wetness of the day prevented the attendance of many. A good show of stock, of a very fine description, was exhibited both by gentlemen and farmers*
- iii. **1834** *dinner. Mr Elliott, as secretary, rose and gave a most gratifying account of the progress of the society since the last meeting. He remarked upon the flourishing state of its finances, notwithstanding the increased number and amount of the premiums, and on the occasion of five new members. But, perhaps, the most interesting occurrence of the evening was, the sensible and manly speech of Mr Matthew Coghlan, a respectable farmer of the barony, who, in returning thanks for the “Working Farmers”, expatiated upon the benefits which they had derived from the formations of the society, not merely in agricultural knowledge, but from the kindly feeling which is kept up between landlord and tenant.*
- iv. **1836,** *His Lordship, could not but congratulate them on the progressive improvement which had taken place in the objects for which the Society had been formed.*
- v. **1839.** *The annual cattle show of the barony of Iverk took place at Piltown on Tuesday last. Lord Duncannon (the founder and president of the society)....*
- vi. **1840.** *On Tuesday the 29th September, the annual show and dinner of the Iverk Agricultural Society took place at Piltown, under very favourable conditions. The day was beautiful throughout, and the attendance accordingly was highly respectable*
- vii. **1846.** *The annual exhibition of this society took place in Piltown, on Thursday, when a very fine show of superior cattle, vegetables, and farming utensils was displayed. Premiums were awarded to a great many for well-kept and regulated cottages, &cs. The attendance was extremely limited owing to the very unsettled state of the weather.*
- viii. **In 1847** *it was reported that Emphases was on “the production of the greatest amount of food for man and beast”. Great work was in hand and it isn’t surprising to find that in the Piltown district the hunger pain did not gnaw so heavily.*
- ix. **1850** *The cattle were exhibited in an enclosed or railed space at the eastern end of the Sessions House, and the manufactures at the hotel of Mr Anthony, where some*

very good frieze and blankets were placed for inspection. The Judges all agreed that the stock on this occasion presented a marked contrast to that shown last year. The digging match also excited considerable interest. The ground had been previously measured off, and a dozen hardy labourers competed for the prizes in the presence of a dense crowd of spectators. The work was done in capital style, and in an exceedingly short space of time

- x. **1852** *The annual cattle show and exhibition of this society was held on the magnificent lawn of Bessborough – convenient to Mr. Anthony’s tastefully laid out garden – at Piltown, on Wednesday last. The attendance of persons was large and respectable, and the show of cattle, sheep, green crops, onions, fowl, &c., &c., very creditable indeed. We were particularly struck with the marked improvement in the quality of sheep and cattle, on which the farmer must now so much depend. The green crops, too, were very fine, and clearly showed the great attention which had been bestowed upon them; for, as an auxiliary, green crops are of vast importance to the farmer. A few mangolds were exhibited (two of which Mr P. K. Reid brough home with him as specimens), and were so enormously large as to weigh 14lb. each!*

- xi. **1856** *This show comprised some fine specimens of every kind of stock. There were two beautiful bulls shown by Major Quentin and Thomas Lalor, D.L., Gregg, to decide between which the judges had very great difficulty; they, however, eventually gave the prize to Major Quentin.*

- xii. **1859** *The annual show of this society took place on Tuesday last in the Bessborough demesne, Piltown. In every respect the show was a most creditable one, affording the strongest assurances that the Society is in the most prosperous condition, and in its operations of immense benefit to the district. The day was tolerable fine, and a very large assemblage was on the ground about 11 o’clock, not only from the immediate neighbourhood, but for various distant localities.*

- xiii. **1861** *The annual show of the Iverk farming Society was held on Wednesday, at Bessborough Park, Piltown. The day was very fine, and the attendance very large. The charge for admission to the yard was only two pence each, and the attendance must have been very large, when the sum of eight pounds was received at the gate. The show was held in Bessborough Park, where the magnificent trees and the soft verdure added very greatly to the to the attraction of the scene*

- xiv. **1862** *The condition of the farmers also betoken the care extended to them, and we notice that the noble Earl has endeavoured to stimulate further competition in the race of improvement in the offer of a prize of £20 for the best managed farm – not the best farm, but the best managed – and the judges who will visit the competing farms at different times will take into consideration the original circumstances of*

the farms, in order to give the farmer on naturally poor soil the advantage which arises from his superior skill and attention.

- xv. **1863** *The annual Cattle Show for the Iverk Farming district, was held in a very commodious and appropriate park in the beautiful little town of Piltown and with all the show arrangements particularly attended to, this show must rank amongst the most successful which have been held in the vicinity. The number of entries was pretty large, comparatively speaking; and from what we have heard from the officers of the show, it has this year considerably improved both in point of numbers and quality. Some very fine animals of all classes were exhibited, and on the whole the show was a very successful one.*
- xvi. **1864** *On Tuesday last, the thirty-eight show of the Iverk Farming Society was held at Piltown under the most favourable auspices. The weather was fine, though a bracing wind was blowing, and under the invigorating presence of the noble patron, everything connected with the proceedings was most encouraging. The show of stock in every class, particularly that of the farming class, was very excellent and justly admired*
- xvii. **1866** *On Tuesday last, the fortieth anniversary of this society was held in that portion of the Bessborough demesne, near Piltown, usually allocated for the users of the annual exhibition by the noble owner. There were about 300 entries, which is a large number, considering the extent of the district. The day held out beautifully fine, and the show ground presented a gay aspect from eleven o'clock in the morning to three in the afternoon, which was the hour fixed for the annual dinner.*
- xviii. *The Iverk Show, in current living memory is well known as a family, social and reunion event. A report in 1866 records –The Iverk Show is by far a more social gathering than many, and perhaps any in Ireland, and the good Earl presides over it with a paternal grace which lends a homeliness to the whole scene. Not alone do the farmers come there to exhibit their choicest cattle and compete for prizes, but the other members of their families join in social union, celebrating the anniversary in the happiest way within their reach. Piltown is gay at least once a year, and then it is very gay.*

There is no doubt that the show excels in the way of a re-union or social gathering.

- xix. **1867** *The Society, founded by the late Earl of Bessborough, is still, after forty-one years of patient labour, steadily maintaining its position. It does not aim at any very imposing results, but simple desires that the tenantry, and especially the farming and other industrial classes, shall at least, continue to hold the same useful and creditable position which has long distinguished the labouring*

population of the district. It leads the way to improvement in agricultural operations, in dairy, and in home manufacture

- xx. **1868** *The annual show of this society – one of the oldest and, certainly, one of the best managed associations of the kind in the country or Great Britain – took place on Tuesday last on its usual site, the Bessboro' demesne, adjoining the prettily situated and well cared village of Piltown, forming one of many of such villages upon the admirably arranged property of that truly popular nobleman, the Earl of Bessborough. The previous night's very heavy rain raised the fear that the subsequent day would be unpropitious for the exhibition, but at early morn the atmosphere changed, and throughout the day the weather was all that would be desired.*
- xxi. **1869** *We have examined the flaxes belonging to the different competitors connected with the Iverk Farming Society for Mr Wm Malcomson's prizes, and we found the flax belonging to each competitor so exceedingly well grown, and the crops so equal, after very mature consideration take the liberty to suggest that the prizes should be equally divided amongst them in the following manner, viz.: - The prizes offered for the best acre to be equally divided between Samuel Morris, Robert Blackmore, R. Durney, George Lane, and T. O'Donnell; and the prize for the best half acre to Michael Power. Where all was so well grown, we cannot consistently select on or two, for in every case the flax was a first-class crop, showing the great care and skill bestowed upon it by each competitor, as well as the adaptability of the soil and climate for the growth of flax. – Joseph Bogie and W. D. Haslam". That fact, perhaps unprecedented in the annuals of agricultural societies, speaks strongly in favour of the energy of the farmers of Iverk, and must prove encouraging to those who take an interest, warm and lasting, in promoting the cultivation of what must really be useful and beneficial, first to the farmers and eventually to the community at large. This result is very much owing to the teaching of Mr McFarlane, flax instructor of this district, who devoted much of his time to the duty.*
- xxii. **1872** *The annual show of stock, sheep, swine, horses and poultry in connection with this old established society came off today in the pretty little village of Piltown. As is usual the tenants of the Bessborough estate, with a large portion of inhabitants of Carrick-on-Suir, Feddon, Portlaw and even Waterford attended. The morning was lowering, but towards twelve o'clock it cleared up, and the result was that the show presented a very animated appearance during the day. The exhibition of stock in all departments was very large, while it was observable that a marked improvement had taken place in the quality of cattle exhibited. Indeed, one of the great features of these annual gatherings, at least in the south of Ireland – and I have attended the greater number held – has been the very great taste that the farming classes are exhibiting in the rearing of cattle.*

- xxiii. **1873** *The annual show of this old and vigorous society was held on Tuesday last, and, as usual, on the rose lawn of the Bessborough demesne. I never remember seeing the proceedings, always agreeable on these occasions, go off to more advantage. The day was beautifully fine, and the charming little village of Piltown was gay with flags and bunting of the brightest colours, prettily arranged by the ladies of the place, under the direction of Mrs Hackett. The cattle, sheep, pigs, roots, etc., formed one of the most successful shows at which I have been present for some time. Almost every class had its competitors, and in butter it was extremely brisk, no less than 25 firkins of that excellent article taking the prizes. In this class, John Walsh, of Fiddown, took the cup with a firkin of butter pronounced by the judges to be of the very best quality. The roots were something astonishing in size, and were excellent in condition; the onions, cabbages, mangolds, grown most of them from seed supplied by Messrs J. Grubb & Son, Carrick, being the subject of well-deserved praise during the day.*
- xxiv. **1874** *There was a large attendance. The zeal and ardour evinced by all present in the desire for the promotion plainly showed that according to present prospects and arrangements the Iverk Farming Society will rank A 1 in Ireland*

The full newspaper reports of the first fifty years of the Iverk Farming Society's record can be found on the Iverk Show's website www.iverkshow.ie.

Norman Storey, B.Agr.Sc.

PRO Iverk Show

14th July 2021.