Leitrim in 1839

Compiled by Kevin McManus. *Kevin is a history teacher at Drumshanbo Vocational School*

The following is an insightful analysis of Leitrim in the years preceding the 'Great Hunger'. It is based upon:

> The Statistical Survey of Leitrim, Dublin, 1802

> Griffith's Account of the Connaught Coal Tract

> Report of Railway Commissioners for Ireland

> Cox's History of Ireland

> Parliamentary Reports and Papers

(Please note that some of the spellings of Leitrim's geographical features and place names are Anglicised versions of Irish words)

LEITRIM, a maritime county in the province of Connaught in Ireland, bounded on the north by the bay of Donegal and by Donegal county, on the north-east by the county of Fermanagh, on the east by the county of Cavan, on the south-east and south by the county of Longford, and on the south-west and west by the counties of Roscommon and Sligo, from the former of which it is separated by the river Shannon.

According to the map of Ireland published under the superintendence of the *Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge,* Leitrim lies between 53° 47' and 54° 27' N latitude, and between 7° 35' and 8° 25' W longtitude; and according to the Ordnance Survey of Ireland, extends from north/north-west to south/south-east 51.25 statute miles, varying in breadth from 5.5 to 21.

The area is as follows:
Land: 368,614 statute acres
Water: 23,747 statute acres
Total: 392,362 statute acres or 613 sq miles.

In 1839 the population was 141,524. The outline of Leitrim is very irregular, being contracted in the centre to little more than the breadth of Lough Allen, north and south of which lake the county expands into its two principal divisions. The district lying south and east of Lough Allen is an irregular parallelogram of about 18 miles by 20, the western and south-western sides of which are formed by Lough Allen and the line of the Shannon, and the north-eastern and south-eastern sides by the boundaries of the counties of Cavan and Longford respectively.

The southern portion of this district, abutting on the counties of Longford and Roscommon, is to a considerable extent encumbered with narrow and steep ridges of low elevation, running in a direction about 10° west of north and east of south, which is consequently the general direction of all the streams and roads by which the intermediate valleys are traversed. The numerous small lakes also abounding in this part of Leitrim are of conformable outline. Of these the principal is Rynn lough, about two miles in length by half a mile in breadth, formed by an expansion of the Rynn river, which runs southward out of Leitrim through the north-western extremity of Longford to the Shannon.

The Eslin, which brings down the waters of several small lakes situated between the Rynn and the Shannon, joins the latter river at the southern extremity of Lough Boffin. The rough country above mentioned lies eastward from the Eslin towards the Longford boundary, along which it extends for a distance of ten miles, covering in all a tract of about 30 square miles.

Northward from this tract extends an open undulating plain, interspersed with numerous lakes and streams as far as the southern extremity of Lough Allen. This district forms part of the great limestone plain of Ireland, and contains some patches of excellent arable land, but is in general more adapted for grazing. The surface is more irregular than is generally the case in other divisions of the limestone country, in consequence of the great number of clay and gravel ridges scattered over it.

The general direction of these ridges conforms to that of the heights farther south, but they are not disposed with so much regularity. The principal heights in this part of the county are Sheemore and Sheebeg, two hills of moderate elevation rising from the eastern bank of the Shannon. The main drainage of the limestone district is southward and westward to the Shannon, but several considerable streams in the north-eastern division of it run eastward to the lakes on the border of Cavan. Of the latter the principal is the river Dale, which runs into Garadice Lake, and thence to Lough Erne.

A cluster of lakes, of which the largest are called Lough Scur and St John's Lough, occupies a tract of about six miles in length on the north of this level district, and there are upwards of fifty other lakes, varying in size from a quarter of a mile to a mile in length, scattered throughout the same portion of the county.

The principal towns and villages are

situated on the borders of the plain, the interior being comparatively thinly inhabited. They are, on the western side, Drumshanbo, at the southern extremity of Lough Allen; Leitrim, a village, four miles farther down the Shannon; Carrick-on-Shannon, the county town, three miles south of Leitrim, situated at the point where the Shannon changes its southern for a south-eastern course; Jamestown, three miles south-east of Carrick-on-Shannon, and Drumsna, two miles farther down the river. Along the southern margin of the plain the towns are Mohill, north of Lough Rynn, Cloone, and Carrigallen, near the Cavan boundary. On the east is the village of Newton Gorie (Newtowngore), and in the north the small town of Ballinamore, and the villages of Castlefore and Keshcarrigan, the two latter situated between Lough Scur and St John's Lough.

That part of the basin of Lough Allen which is included within this county is formed by the group of Sliabh an Iarainn on the east, by the Lackagh range lying south of Manor Hamilton on the north, and by a part of the Munterkenny and Braulieve ranges on the west. The group of Sliabh an Iarainnn extends from above Drumshanbo into the west part of Cavan, a distance of about twelve miles. Its highest point is at its southern extremity, where it has an altitude of 1,922 feet. The summits of Bencroy and Lugnacuillagh, which are the most prominent points within this county in the group farther north, rise to 1,707 and 1,494 feet respectively.

Between the two latter mountains the Yellow river descends by a broad and precipitous channel to Lough Garadice, and the Shannon, which has its source in Cavan, enters the northern extremity of Lough Allen through the valley intervening between Lugnacuillagh and the eastern declivities of the Lackagh groups upon the north. The highest summit of the Lackagh range is 1,448 feet, and between it and the Munterkenny group, which rise along the western shore of Lough Allen, a wide valley intervenes watered by the Diffagher. The Diffagher has its chief source in Belhavel lake, a sheet of water about two miles in length, which occupies the summit level between Lough Allen and the valley of the Bonnet; the waters to the north of this point finding their way to the Atlantic either by Sligo or the bay of Donegal, and those to the south descending to Loch Allen and the Shannon.

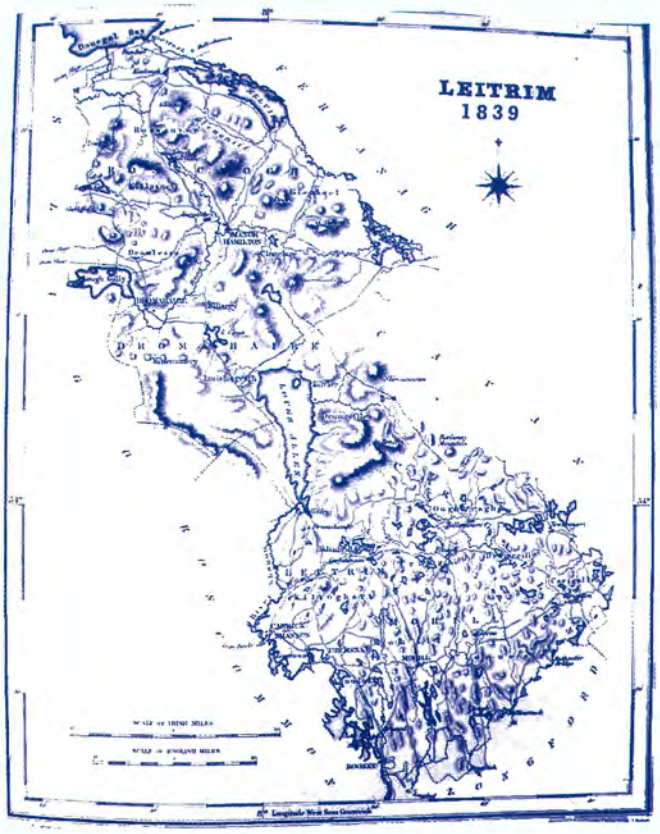
The heights of Munterkenny, the highest point of which is 1,377 feet, bound Lough Allen on the west, forming the northern side of the valley of the Arigna, which river for some distance constitutes the boundary between Leitrim and Roscommon, and runs into the south-western extremity of Lough Allen through a portion of the latter county. Besides the rivers enumerated, Lough Allen receives the waters of numerous minor streams and winter torrents, particularly from the western side of Sliabh an Iarainnn, which is deeply furrowed with their channels. The lake is eight miles in length, and from one to three in breadth, and lies nearly north and south.

The Shannon issues in a noble stream from its southern extremity, at which point the scenery is highly picturesque, as well as at the opposite end of the lake, where several islands and peninsulas diversify the outline. The general aspect of the lake however is gloomy, and from its situation it is exposed to violent squalls, which render navigation dangerous. Its summer level is 159 and its winter level 163 feet above the level of the sea at low water. The Shannon, in its passage from Lough Allen to the extremity of the county, has a fall of thirty feet, which is principally distributed over the first seven miles of its course, where the difficulty of navigation has been obviated by the construction of a canal, extending from Drumshanbo to Battlebridge. Another canal, about a mile long, avoids the rapids between Jamestown and Drumsna. Beyond the range of Lackagh and the table-land occupied by the lake of Belhavel rise four detached mountain groups, including, with the heights of Lackagh, five distinct valleys, which unite in a pleasantly situated plain occupying nearly the centre of the northern division of the county. The town of Manor Hamilton and the village of Lurganboy are situated close to one another in the common terminus of these valleys, and through these towns the entire inland communication between Leitrim and Sligo and the northern counties is carried on. Of these valleys, the best defined are those of the Upper and Lower Bonnet. The Bonnet, taking its rise from Glenade Lough, near the north-western extremity of the county, runs south-east between the heights of Dartry on the north, and a prolongation of the range of Benbulben in Sligo on the south, to within a mile of Manor Hamilton, where it is joined by the Owenmore descending from a valley between the eastern flank of the Dartry mountains and the western declivity of Dooey.

After its junction with the Owenmore, the Bonnet changes its direction to south-west, and runs with a winding course by Dromahair into the eastern end of Lough Gill, the waters of which are alternately discharged into the Bay of Sligo. The valley between Dromahair and Manor Hamilton is formed by the brow of Lackagh on the eastern side, and on the west by the mountain of Benbo and its subordinate range.

Benbo, though not exceeding 1,400 feet in height, from its shape and position has a striking appearance. The slopes on each side of the valley are well wooded, and the whole scene is one of considerable beauty. North of the group of Benbo lies the valley of Glencar watered by the Differen, which runs westward by Glencar lake and a wooded defile through the northern part of Sligo to the sea. Glanfarn is another valley terminating in the open country round Manor Hamilton. It lies nearly due east and west in an opposite direction from Glencar, and is watered by a considerable river running eastward into Lough Macnean. The valley is bounded by the northern brow of Lackagh on the south, and by the heights of Dooey on the north, the mountains rising on each side to a height of 1,400 to 1,500 feet. Steep sides and flat extended summits are the characteristics of all the mountains in this district of Leitrim, and, although of no remarkable altitude, they severally cover very large areas, so that there is probably not more than one-fourth of the northern district unencumbered. Loughs Macnean and Melvin stretch along the north-eastern boundary of the county, separating it from Fermanagh, in which they partly lie. They are respectively 3.5 and 7.5 statute miles in length, and are pleasingly diversified with wooded islands. The Kilcoo River connects them, and their waters are discharged into the Bay of Donegal by the Drowes, from which latter the bathing village of Bundrowes, at its embouchure, takes its name.

At the western extremity of Lough Melvin is the village of Kinloch, in an open tract expanding towards the sea, and contracted on the inland side, between the heights of Dartry and the prolongation of the Benbulben group, forming a continuation of the valley of the Upper Bonnet. The river Duff, which separates Leitrim from Sligo, runs into the Bay of Donegal, at the eastern extremity of the coast-line. The shore is for the most part a rocky bluff, with a rough stony beach along the foot of it, and is exposed to the whole swell of the Atlantic. A few yawls are kept at Bundrowes; but there is no shelter on any part of the coast for larger craft. Bundrowes has the requisites for constructing a harbour, but the cost would be greater than any contemplated advantage would repay. There are salmon fisheries at the mouths of the Drowes and Duff rivers.



Samuel Lewis Map of Leitrim in 1839

A new road has been lately completed from the sea at Bundrowes, through Glenade to Manor Hamilton, and thence by the west side of Lough Allen to Carrick- on-Shannon and Drumsna. The other principal roads in the northern district of the county pursue the lines of the several villages radiating from Manor Hamilton. The chief roads in the southern district run east and west, connecting the towns and villages which occupy the northern and southern margins of the open limestone country. A line of railroad has been projected from Dublin to Sligo, which would pass through the southern extremity of Leitrim, but it has not been recommended by the Railway Commissioners for Ireland. The Shannon is crossed by seven bridges within the limits of the county.

Climate

The climate is raw and damp, particularly in the northern parts of the county, owing to the great extent of moory ground and the vicinity of the Atlantic. In the sheltered valleys however, particularly in the vicinities of Dromahair and Manor Hamilton, where there is a kindly soil, vegetation is as luxuriant as in most parts of other counties in the same latitude. The surface of Leitrim was until a comparatively late period well stocked with timber. It is now barer of wood than most of the neighbouring counties; the only traces of the former forests consisting of some copses in Glencar, and a small quantity of old timber preserved in private demesnes.

History

Before the coming of the English, Leitrim formed a portion of the territory of Breifne of which O'Rourke was petty king, and was called Breifne, or Brenny O'Rourke, to distinguish it from Brenny O'Reilly, the present county of Cavan.

It was by carrying off Devorgil, the wife of Tiernan O'Rourke, king of

Breifne, that Dermod MacMurrogh provoked the hostility which forced him to seek the aid of Henry II. The whole of Brenny O'Rourke is said to have been bestowed by King John on De Lacey; the O'Rourke nevertheless continued to maintain their independence until the reign of Elizabeth, when Leitrim was first reduced to shire ground as a separate county by the Lord Deputy Sussex in 1563, or, according to others, by Sir Henry Sidney in 1565. During the earlier period of Anglo-Irish history it is said to have formed portion of the county of Roscommon.

Brian O'Rourke, the principal man among the native Irish of the county, resented the introduction of the English laws; and after many bickerings with Sir Richard Bingham, president of Connaught, broke out into open rebellion in 1588. He was assisted by MacSwiny, and had a body of Munster troops in his pay, with whom he held the castle of Dromahair until compelled to retreat towards Donegal by Sir Richard Bingham and the earl of Clanrickard.

Disputes having occurred between O'Rourke and the leader of the Munster auxiliaries, he was soon after driven to take shelter with MacSwiny in Donegal. From thence he fled to Scotland, where he was delivered to the English authorities by James VI, and was finally carried to London, and there tried for treason and executed. It is related of him by Lord Bacon that he petitioned to be hanged with a withy, after his own country fashion.

On the breaking out of O'Donnell's rebellion, in 1596, Tadhg O'Rourke, the son of Brian, joined the insurgents, but submitted on the 14th of February 1597. In June of the same year however, he resumed arms, and with Maguire defeated Sir Conyers Clifford in a pass of the Curlew Mountains, with considerable loss to the English. He finally submitted in 1603, and took out a patent of the residue of his estate, which had been allotted to him on an English tenure.

By an inquisition, taken in 1615, the king's title to the greater part of Leitrim was affirmed, and numerous patents were granted to undertakers by a commission appointed for the purpose of disposing of the estates of the crown in Leitrim, Longford, and King's County. On the breaking out of the rebellion of 1641, the native Irish, headed by Sir Owen O'Rourke, seized all the places of strength in the county, with the exception of the castles of Carrickdrumrusk and Manor Hamilton, the latter of which had been built a short time before by Sir Frederic Hamilton, one of the grantees under the commission. Jamestown, a castle of Sir Charles Coote's, also held out until 1645, when it was taken by Lord Taaffe. The Roman Catholic prelates and clergy assembled here in 1650; and having nominated agents to treat with foreign powers on their behalf, concluded their synod, August 12th, by drafting a decree of excommunication against the marquis of Ormond and all his adherents.

The confiscations which followed on the termination of these wars included almost all the lands that had been allowed to remain to the native proprietors under former attainders, and may be said to have extinguished the family of O'Rourke. The forfeitures consequent on the war of the revolution of 1688 do not appear to have extended to Leitrim, which, from its remote situation, was little affected by the military operations of that era. In 1798 the county was traversed from north to south by the French under Humbert, who, after taking Castlebar, marched northward through the county of Sligo to Dromahair, and thence across the southern district of Leitrim to Ballinamuck, on the borders of Longford, where, after a short resistance, he surrendered to Earl Cornwallis.

The are some remains of antiquity in Leitrim. There are some ruins, of the the abbey of Fenagh, founded by St Caillin in the fifth century, and celebrated during the early period of Irish church history as a school of divinity. The abbey of Creevlea, near Dromahair, founded by the wife of Owen O'Rourke in 1508, was an extensive pile, of which the principal walls are still standing: it contains some curious tombs and monuments.

The remains of the other religious houses are insignificant. O'Rourke's Hall at Dromahair, Castle Longfield, Cloncarrick Castle, Castle Car, and several others now in ruins, belonged to the O'Rourkes. Jamestown and Castlefore castles were built by Sir Charles Coote in the early part of the seventeenth century. Dromahair Castle, of which the gables are still standing, was erected in 1628 by Sir William Villiers.

The strongest and handsomest fortalice however in the county is the castle of Manor Hamilton, built about the same period by Sir Frederic Hamilton. It is quoined and corniced with cut stone, and is surrounded by a regular rampart with four bastions.

Geology

The varieties of surface in Leitrim indicate the internal structure with peculiar precision. The flat-topped mountain groups showing steep escarpments and natural terraces belong to the millstone-grit or Lough Allen coal formation. The undulating open country has the floetz-limestone for its substratum, and the rough

coarse land, when not belonging to the Lough Allen basin, generally consists of sandstone, conglomerate, and wacke. The rocks of the Lough Allen coal-district are more analogous to the mill-stone-grit of the north of England than to coal tracts in general.

The series reposes on the splintery limestone which forms the upper member of the carboniferous or floetz-limestone field. First in ascending order occur thick beds of yellowish-white quartzy sandstone with interposed beds of black shale. The edges of these strata present the appearance of terraces. Then succeeds a massive bed of shale which in some parts of the series attains a thickness of 700 feet. The lower beds of this member consist of thin alternations of black shale with impure dark bluish grey argillaceous limestone, containing many of the fossils of the carboniferous limestone formation.

The calcareous beds gradually grow thinner as they ascend, and at length disappear, their places being supplied by layers, and frequently by large flattened spheroids, of argillaceous ironstone. The shale associated with the ironstone contains frequent casts of marine organic remains. The beds of ironstone also grow thinner as they ascend, and at length disappear, leaving the upper portion of the shale of a uniform structure. The next member of the series after the massive shale is a stratum of yellow sandstone, in some parts of the district 250 feet thick, associated with beds of true millstone-grit. Alternations of shale and sandstone containing beds of coal succeed where-ever the mountains are of sufficient altitude; for it would appear that such a formation had originally extended over the entire district, and that the absence of those members from the lower mountains has been owing to their removal by some abrading and denuding force.

At present they remain only on the summits of Sliabh an-Iarainnn. Lugnaculleagh, Lackagh, and on the highest part of the Munterkenny range; and the occurrence of coal in lumps throughout the sand-stone, gravel, and blue-clay hills of the south and south-eastern parts of the county confirms the supposition that a portion of the coal formation has been removed, and points at the north-west as the direction from which the denuding agent must have proceeded. The chief workable beds of the district are situated on the summit of the Braulieve Mountains, on the southern side of the valley of the Arigna, where the coal-measures are worked for the purpose of smelting the ironstone with which they are associated.

Where the millstone-grit formation terminates, the floetz-limestone reappears, and occupies the greater portion of the district watered by the Bonnet and its tributaries. The grit and sandstone occur however in the detached formation of Dartry, and a stripe of yellow sandstone and conglomerate, similar to that of the extreme south, intervenes between the external limit of the limestone and the sea. The only primary rock within the county occurs along the western boundary of the valley of the Lower Bonnet, where the granite and trap formation of the Ox mountains of Sligo is prolonged by the southern and eastern shore of Lough Gill, along the valley of the Bonnet, to within a few miles of Manor Hamilton. Benbo, which rises about the middle of this range, is a mass of gneiss passing into mica slate.

It is surprising that in a country so rich in minerals there should not at present be any mine in operation. The smelting of iron was carried on in several places around Lough Allen while the wood of the native forests lasted, but as no care was taken by coppicing or planting to preserve the supply, there is no longer any fuel of that kind to be had. Lead-ore has been raised near Lurganboy, and copper-ore from the north side of Benbo. Manganese is found in considerable quantities in the neighbourhood of the latter place. Fullers' earth, potters' clay, steatites, and marls are also obtained in the district between Dromahair and Lurganboy, Chalybeate springs are numerous on the borders of the Lough Allen district.

Soil, Cultivation and Agriculture

The soil is far from kindly even in the open limestone country, being for the most part stiff, cold, and very retentive of wet. The best tracts are along the Shannon, Ran, and Bonnet rivers, in the vicinity of Drumsna, Mohill, Dromahair, and Manor Hamilton. The principal crops are potatoes, oats, and flax. Wheat is not grown to any considerable extent. The loy, or narrow-bladed spade, is still used in the more remote districts, and the potato crop is not infrequently dibbled in with a pointed stick called a 'steveen.'

Improved implements of husbandry are scarcely in use among any but the gentlemen farmers. Leitrim is more a grazing than an agricultural county. Large quantities of young stock, chiefly horned cattle, are raised on the pasturable plains of the southern district. *The table below* exhibits the sales of agricultural produce in the chief market-towns in the years 1826 and 1835.

Table

	Barrels of wheat		*Barrels of oats*		*Barrels of rye*	
	1826	1835	1826	1835	1826	1835
Carrick-on-Shannon	270	246	2,320	2,160	209	118
Drumsna	avge	483	avge	8,987		
Drumshanbo	avge	483	15,600	23,400		
Jamestown	avge	1,449	avge			
Mohill	avge	1,449	avge	5,200		
Dromod	avge	1,449	avge	500		
Ballinamore	avge	1,449	avge	3,565		
Fenagh	avge	2,228				
Carrigallen	avge	2,228	avge	160		
Dromahair	*included in sales for Sligo*					
Drumkeerin	*included in sales for Sligo*					
Manor Hamilton	*included in sales for Sligo*					

avge=average

There are no great demesnes of the resident nobility in Leitrim, and the mansions of the resident gentry are not so numerous as in any of the adjoining counties. The neighbourhoods of Carrigallen, Drumsna, Dromahair, and Manor Hamilton are the best situated with respect to the residence of the higher classes; and there are several handsome demesnes on the shores of lochs Melvin and Macnean. The peasantry, who generally speak the English language, are decent in appearance, and have the character of industry and peaceable habits. Their mode of living is however very poor, and, generally speaking, they are inferior in physical advantage to the peasantry of the midland counties. The wages of agricultural labourers vary from 6 pence to 10 pence per day for 140 working days in the year. Wages are higher in the northern district than in that south of Lough Allen. Turf fuel is everywhere abundant.

Industry

The spinning and weaving of linens is the only branch of manufacture carried on with activity. There are 4 bleach-greens in the county, which annually finish about 32,000 pieces of cloth, chiefly for the English market the number of weavers in 1831 was 437, of flax-dressers 33, of reed-makers 2, of millers 54. of tanners 10, and of tobacconists 1. A coarse pottery ware is made near Dromahair, and there is throughout the county a considerable manufacture, for home consumption, of friezes, flannels, and woollens. The trade of the county, exclusive of the linen business, consists almost wholly in the sale of grain, butter, and livestock.

Towns and Populations

Leitrim is divided into the baronies of Rossclogher on the north, containing part of the town of Manor Hamilton (population in 1831, 1,348) and the village of Lurganboy (pop. 134); Dromahair, occupying the remainder of the northern division, containing the villages of Dromahair (pop. 336) and Drumkeerin (pop. 284); Carrigallen on the south-east, containing the towns of Carrigallen (pop. 492), Ballinamore (pop. 312), and the village of Newtowngore (pop. 207); Leitrim on the south-west, containing part of the town of Carrick-on-Shannon (total pop. 1,870), the towns of Drumshanbo (pop. 479), Drumsna (pop. 427), Jamestown (pop. 311), and the villages of Leitrim (pop. 274) and Keshcarrigan (pop. 94); and Mohill on the south, containing the town of Mohill (pop. 1,606) and the village of Dromod (pop. 162).

Carrick-on-Shannon, formerly Carrick Drumrusk, is incorporated by charter of the 11th James I, but since the year 1826 the corporation have not exercised any functions. It is well situated for trade, having a good bridge over the Shannon, and water communication to Limerick, Dublin, and Lough Allen. It formerly returned two members to the Irish parliament, but was disfranchised at the time of the Union. The town is badly paved and is not lighted. Jamestown, also incorporated by charter of the 19th James I, formerly returned two members to the Irish parliament: it is now disfranchised, and its corporation is extinct. Mohill, Manor Hamilton, and Drumsna are neatly built towns; the other places are inconsiderable.

Administration

Leitrim lies partly in the diocese of Ardagh, but chiefly in that of Kilmore. Prior to the Union it returned six members to the Irish parliament. The representation it now limited to two county members. In January, 1836, the constituency consisted of 1,491 voters. The assizes for the county are held at Carrick-on-Shannon, where the county gaol and court-house are situated. General quarter-sessions are held at Carrick-on-Shannon, Ballinamore, and Manor Hamilton, at which latter places are sessions, court-houses, and bridewells.

The district lunatic asylum is at Ballinasloe, in the county of Galway. The county infirmary is at Carrick-on-Shannon, and there are dispensaries in all the towns and villages. The constabulary force in 1836 consisted of 5 chief constables, 21 constables, 86 sub-constables, and 5 horses, the total cost of maintaining this force amounted to £4,633-12 shillings (s)-8 pence (d), defrayed in nearly equal proportions by government and the county.

In 1836 the total number of criminal offenders committed to the county gaol was 327, of whom 282 were males and 45 females. Of these, 89 males could read and write at the time of their committal, 25 males and 2 females could read only, 144 males and 30 females could neither read nor write, and of 24 males and 13 females the instruction could not be ascertained. The only barrack for troops in Leitrim is at Carrick-on-Shannon.

The county expenses are levied by grand jury assessments. The amount assessed in 1835 was £15,638-12s-10d, of which £2,107-0s-10d was for roads and bridges charged to the county at large; £2,794-7s-4d was for those of the baronies; £5,291-8s-11d, for public buildings, salaries, &c; £2,338-3s-7d for police; and £3,107-12s-1d for repayment of loans from government.