

on tenanted holdings were cut down and burned. As the family possessed few utensils people grew their thumb nails long enough to peel potatoes. The boiled potatoes were placed in a wicket basket called a 'skib' which was placed on a stool around which the family gathered at mealtimes. Eating in this way was called 'dabbing at the stool'. Herrings ('sudum' in Irish) were a rare treat as few costal dwellers had the equipment to fish, salt or smoke a catch. Usually the tenant farmer and his family had to imagine the herring and said they were having 'blind scudum' or 'scudum up the road'! Skimmed milk was often available from larger farms, where butter was churned, available free or in exchange for chores.

An adult required about 4.5Kg of potato per day to survive. It was a healthy diet. The milk provided protein and calcium while the potatoes provided more calories than required. Children who survived the first two years of life had a high chance of survival into middle age.

The variety of potato grown was the Lumper - a large ugly potato with little flavour - but it cropped and kept well. The crop was sown in March and April in 'lazy beds' which consisted of soil removed from trenches every 2.5 metres. As the crop grew the trenches were deepened and the removed soil was added to the lazy beds. 'Moulding the potatoes' as the process was called was light work carried out by the older members of the family if the husband was labouring or had migrated for seasonal employment. Potatoes were harvested in September and placed in clay pits for protection against the winter frosts.

In years of partial crop failure peasants were forced to borrow money to buy meal. June, July and August were called the 'meal months'. Rates of interest charged by the money lenders or 'gombeen men' as they were called were often as high as 600% per annum in bad times. Those who were refused loans resorted to eating nettles and a weed called 'praiseach' and to begging in the towns.

Under the Rundale (sometimes called Runrig) system a holding of, say, forty eight statute acres held by a middle-aged married man in 1800 was, by the time of the Great Famine, in about eight jointly tenanted divisions of six acres each held by his married sons and older grandsons and their children. The principal cause of early marriages, according to the contemporary accounts, was the reckless subdivision of land which made it possible for a newly-wed couple to grow their own subsistence. This subdivision was frequently condoned by the landlord's agent without the landlord's knowledge.

As a consequence of this subdivision and increased rent there developed an ever increasing dependance on tillage, in particular on the potato which had the highest food yield per acre. Enclosed fields were by 1830 unnecessary in arable areas as there were few animals grazing, the land have been given over almost completely to potatoes. In the Mayo townland of Liscananawn, for instance, the land valuator cited the case where the townland's 167 acres were divided in 330 portions, its 110 occupiers having three portions each. In the townland of Curraghadooey, in 1856 - six years after the Great Famine - 28 of the townlands 57 holdings were held by tenants of the same surname (Hughes). Both of these examples were the result of subdivision. This almost universal dependence on tillage resulted in the Ordnance Survey maps of 1839 showing huge acreages without walls. An acre of good ground provided potatoes for a family of six in a good year. Another acre provided enough grain, mainly oats, to be sold to pay the rent for the two acres.