

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in October 2025, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who were working in the Ulster linen industry.

Jane Bingham's Story – by Michelle Rees

Jane Bingham was born on the 6th of March 1870 in Ballyroney, County Down and was one of eight children. Her parents were David Bingham and Mary Jane Davison and her father was listed as a weaver on her birth certificate. David Bingham and Mary Jane Davison had been married on the 11th of July 1855 in Ballymoney. David Bingham was a weaver at the time and their fathers were both farmers in the area. As a weaver, David Bingham may have worked on a power loom in a factory or from home. However, the investment in a home loom would have been significant for a family.

Ballyroney was a townland in the civil parish of Drumballyroney in County Down. From 1880 to 1955 the Ballyroney train station was the loading point

for the ports of Northwest England and served the whole district. This included the large town of Rathfriland which was 5 kms away. Rathfriland was developed in the mid eighteenth century during the expansion of the linen industry and was a market centre for other trades.

The family were Presbyterians and the local church was at Tierkelly Hill Road, Ballyroney. It was built in 1708 and was described in 1836 as a plain, slated roofed rectangular building and was able to hold 500 people.

On the 1901 census, Jane Bingham was living in Tierkelly, Ballyroney with her parents and two sisters. The property was described as a private dwelling made of stone, brick or concrete with a roof made of thatch, wood or another perishable item. It had between 2 and 4 rooms with 3 windows to the front. The outbuildings consisted of a cow house, calf house and fowl house. David Bingham was the occupier but the landlord was Annie Bingham who lived on the nearby property. This was likely to have been a relative.

David Bingham was head of the household in 1901, aged 61 and working as an agricultural labourer. Unfortunately David Bingham died in 1902 from a debilitating illness of four months. This may have been due to his many years of employment as weaver as they worked in poorly ventilated rooms and often developed chest problems.

According to the 1901 census, Jane and Dinah Bingham were hemstitchers and Sarah Bingham was a dressmaker. Hemstitching was a decorative drawn thread work used to create decorative hems. The work to be completed was obtained from a local agent which could often be the grocer.

Mary Jane Bingham (nee Davison) died on the 12th of August 1905 in Ballyroney and Jane Bingham was present at the time. It was likely that this event disrupted Jane Bingham's living arrangements if she had been residing in the family home. And on the 26th of September 1907 Jane Bingham married Thomas McDowell in Rathfriland. Thomas McDowell was a widow whose wife had died in 1906 and had three children who were 12, 15 and 17 years of age.

In 1911, Jane Bingham was living with her husband, Thomas McDowell, at his farm in Ballyroney. According to the census, the farm consisted of a private dwelling made of stone, brick or concrete and a roof of slate, iron or tiles. There were two to four rooms and there were three windows to the front. There were four outbuildings consisting of a cow house, calf house, piggery and fowl house. Thomas McDowell lived on and owned the property which was larger than that was occupied by her family. Martha Bingham, likely to be a relative, was visiting the household and was employed as a seamstress. Even though Jane and Thomas McDowell had been married for four years there were no surviving children.

On the 28th of September 1912, the Ulster Covenant was signed by nearly half a million men and women, vowing to resist the Home Rule Bill. Thomas and Jane McDowell signed the Ulster Covenant at the Orange Hall and Church in Ballygowan. The hall was constructed in 1899 and remains an active centre for two lodges.

Jane Bingham died on the 28th of January 1938 and her husband, Thomas McDowell, died on the 29th of Jan 1941. They were survived by Thomas McDowell's children as there was no offspring from their marriage.

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