

“The old order changeth”

(Tennyson - “The Passing of Arthur”)

by D.R.M. Weatherup.

In fairness to the reader I must issue a warning. This is not a meticulously researched paper which, judging from your journals, you might expect but the ramblings of a former museum curator and local historian. There are no small numbers in the text, no footnotes, no bibliography. It lays before you memories of this city as I recollect them for I have reached a point in life when it is better to look back to the halcyon days of yore rather than forward to continuing deterioration and the grave.

“I found in Armagh the Splendid Meekness, wisdom and prudence blended Fasting as the Son of God recommended And noble prosperous sages”.

Thus wrote Alfred Prince of the Northumberland Saxons on a visit to study in Ireland in A.D.689. I came to live and work in Armagh over a thousand years later, some fifty years ago now, but still remember my first day here on the first Monday of a long past July. It had rained steadily all June as I finished in Belfast and it rained that day as I walked from the railway station to the Mall where I was to start as Deputy Curator in Armagh County Museum to assist the Curator, Mr. T.G.F. Paterson.

When I left school I had been saved from the fate of becoming a school master by a timely advertisement in the “Northern Whig” inviting applications for the post of junior assistant in the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery. Some years later another newspaper advertisement told me that Armagh County Council required an active youth to assist the curator to pack up its museum in Armagh. The Council was embarking on a rebuilding scheme and both Museum and the County Library had to vacate the Armagh Natural History and Philosophical Society’s premises which they had occupied since the early nineteen thirties but which twenty years later had become too small. I was appointed at an opportune time for being involved in planning the enlargement and refurbishing of an already well regarded regional museum was so much more exciting and challenging than merely helping to keep a department of a large impersonal one running in its accustomed course.

The former school house on the East side of the Mall had been the home of the Society since 1857. It had been adapted to accommodate the library headquarters in the ground floor lecture hall behind the Society’s reading room with the museum on the balcony above leaving an open well in the centre. There was a broad front area over the reading room and a costume gallery over the caretaker’s house in the yard to the rear.

Armagh was then a small city, I could walk across it in half an hour, with streets of fine stone buildings in grey limestone or reddish brown conglomerate. There was little motor traffic and an air of relaxation gone today in the almost continuous roar of massive lorries and cars of many shapes and sizes. There were then but comparatively few cars and vans amongst the horse drawn carts, bicycles

and leisurely pedestrians and there was time to stand and chat.

Gas was still manufactured in the Gas Works and coke delivered by Bob McDowell on his horse drawn lorry, Mr. Murray a general dealer travelled the country in his trap and a Mr. Hughes brought bog fir fire wood from the Birches by pony cart. Farm carts were not uncommon although some farmers drove in on grey Ford-Ferguson tractors often with a passenger perched perilously over the back axle.

At the station the mahogany carriages of the Great Northern Railway arrived and departed behind a variety of black locomotives. The stylish blue express engines only occasionally graced the Portadown to Clones line but the “Shipper” with up to forty wagons of cattle from the West rumbled through on its way to the Maysfield depot in Belfast



Armagh County Museum before the extension showing the light well to the library and at the rear the door to the costume gallery.

TRUSTEES OF NAT. MUSEUMS NI. - ARMAGH COUNTY MUSEUM/D.R.M.W.

and bread, animal feed and other commodities came by goods train for local distribution although the conveyance of coal and timber had by then been lost to road transport.

In the main streets shops, public houses and a few cafes occupied the majority of the premises. The shops, with but a few exceptions such as Woolworths and Quinn's of the Milestone, Lipton's and

mestic utensils and tools for many trades. The emporium of Lennox Brothers had a universal appeal with its range of quality goods presented in a bewildering series of interlinked departments while Miss Sadie Ballentine catered for ladies with more conservative tastes. Hill the cooper had just closed but his tools and stock of barrels, tubs and noggins could be seen through the window of his shop in Ogle Street. The Hughes brothers were still working on a pole lathe on Banbrook Hill although soon to turn to greyhounds.

There were a number of cafés of which The Golden Teapot over Irwin's in Scotch Street was the largest and most fashionable. "Ma" Mercer, further up the street was patronized by the drivers of the large four axle lorries of the Fermanagh merchants. They had come up College Street and along English and Market Streets as there were few one way restrictions then and parked in Thomas Street for a break on the long haul to Enniskillen or Carnteel. The Palmdale Snack Bar in English Street was in competition with the Rainbow Cafe across the road and the longer established ice cream parlours. Nine banking companies operated in



The Goods Shed at Armagh station in 1957

The buses of the Ulster Transport Authority painted in three shades of green had a major share of the passenger traffic and their services radiated throughout the district. The single deck buses were, although small by the standards of today, well appointed with leather seats for their thirty four passengers while rear doors meant that they were not draughty. At that time only single deck vehicles could go beyond Dunmurry because of a low bridge at Derryiagh. Petrol and oil were sold by garages such as Joshua White's and that of Eadie and Johnston. In them motor repairs and sales were a major part of the work. Filling stations with shops and mini-markets were yet to come.

Cattle were still sold in Gaol Square and horses in Barrack Street and butchers had carcasses of beef hanging against the walls above sawdust strewn floors and rows of fowl in their open windows. The cattle market on Cathedral Road was in use and a long line of cattle lorries stretched from Edward Street past the Cathedral gates quietly dipping oil and manure as they waited.

Gilby's wine store were locally owned. Many of their names were familiar like Wright, Wilson, Johnston and Gray but others such as Knipe, Vallely, McAvinchey and Loveday Poynton were novel and intriguing. In grocers, like Kennedy's with its distinctive scents of freshly ground coffee, soap and bacon or Reid's in Scotch Street which also sold animal feeding stuffs, seeds and fertilizers, the assistants wore white aprons and weighed out tea and sugar into paper bags, got biscuits from rows of glass fronted tins, sliced bacon rashers on whirling machines and made up orders for delivery by boys on bicycles while Mr. Emerson and Mr. Kells conducted a pioneering price war across Thomas Street.

Hardware merchants like Turner's and Hillock's dealt in a vast range of goods from coal and timber to paint, do-



Castle Street about 1958

Ireland although the process of amalgamation may have begun. The Munster & Leinster, the National and the Royal did not have branches in Armagh but the Bank of Ireland occupied the magnificent premises built in 1812 by its first agent Leonard Dobbin. The Belfast Bank was in Lanyon's sandstone edifice in English Street with the arms of Belfast above the door and a fine residence for the manager to the rear. The Provincial Bank was close by as was the Hibernian Company's substantial office in Russell Street. In Market Street were the imposing premises of the Northern Bank while the Ulster, as so often, had an undistinguished branch nearby. On the corner of Victoria Street and Barrack Hill the Armagh Saving Bank although now run from Belfast was still true to its purpose of encouraging thrift.

As cash machines were unknown to withdraw money you went into your bank and wrote a cheque to yourself. The cashier paid you, the transaction being entered in your pass book by hand and a tax of 4d was levied on each cheque. Building societies did not feature at all for there was still a certain reluctance to admit to having a mortgage although many people did. Estate agents, bank managers and insurance companies dealt with such matters with discretion. The Irish currency had not then parted company with Sterling and Lady Lavery as Hibernia and the new Queen circulated freely throughout the Island. Bulls, pigs and hens mixed happily in purse and pocket with heraldic escutcheons and Britannia with her ship and lighthouse.

Television was in its infancy but the radio was popular and there were three cinemas in the city. The most modern was the Ritz, a typical ABC picture theatre in Market Street while across the square was the City Cinema. The Picture House in Russell Street had its origins in The Picture Theatre which opened there in 1913. The City Hall, the Urban District Council's offices, was the venue for dances, drama and other social diversions.

The golf course in the Primate's Demesne had at that time only nine holes

and was entered by the Newry Road pedestrian gate where a green wooden hut served as the unlicensed club house and no play was permitted on Sunday. No cars were allowed in not even Surgeon Deane's Rolls-Royce. A tennis club operated in the grounds of the Pavilion and there were public courts at Cathedral

looted and more recently bombed but from these terrors Armagh has always recovered and is hopefully doing so again.

Looking back on those days when it was all new to me I am left with the impression of a city of modest wealth and much hardship yet of accord and



Lipton's grocery shop in Upper English Street c. 1955, the staff were Tony McArdle, Treasa Fagan, Austin McGarvey and in front Tom Kearney.

Road but the open air swimming baths in Folly Lane had just been closed by the County Medical Officer.

The County Council had moved its offices from the Court House to Charlemont Place but the judges still came with due pomp to the Assizes and lodged under military guard on the Mall.

The Grand Jury examined the bills and attended the judges as they inspected the guard of honour from the Barracks where the Royal Irish Fusiliers still upheld the proud traditions of the regiment.

In this city I have lived and worked and found a tolerant and true companion in my wife Anne, here we raised a family and adjudged it a good place to have done so. I have seen it in good times and bad but down the centuries Armagh has suffered such fluctuations in its fortunes. The great religious foundations of St. Patrick, Emancipation, the growth of the fine Georgian city and the industrial prosperity of the Victorian times. On the down side the raids of the Vikings, the Anglo-Irish wars and continual unrest meant that the city was often burned,

genuine friendship although the tensions that were smouldering below were to soon erupt. It was an untidy town but informal, an impression succinctly expressed by W.R. Rodgers in his poem "Armagh":-

*"And the little houses run through the market-town | Slap up against the great,
Like the farmers all clabber and muck walking arm by arm | with the men of estate
There is a through-otherness about Armagh
Delightful to me,"*

When I consider the City then and look at it now it is to Oliver Goldsmith that I turn:-

*"Ill fares the land to hastening ills a prey
Where wealth accumulates and men decay".*