

'Third Armagh' produced world famous temperance activist

by Eric Villiers

Last year saw the centenary of the foundation in Armagh of the Catch-My-Pal Union, an almost forgotten temperance movement that swept across the world saving thousands of lives from 1909 right up to World War Two.

Today in Northern Ireland only two tangible links remain to bear witness to the huge contribution the movement made in Europe, the USA and Australia. The Catch-My-Pal Snooker and Billiards Club at Kingsway Drive, Dunmurry is thought to be the only extant branch of the movement, while Crumlin Road Presbyterian Church, on its website still celebrates its former minister and 'Pals' founder, the Rev Robert James Patterson.

The 'Catch-My-Pal Union' sprang to life in the summer of 1909 as a local initiative known as Armagh

Total Abstinence Union. Later it became the Protestant Total Abstinence Union and finally 'Catch-My-Pal'. Later, during WWI, British recruiting officers adapted the concept to entice young men to 'catch' their 'pals' and sign up in groups. From the beginning the movement spread like wildfire, pushing its founder to quit his ministry at Third Armagh Presbyterian Church (now the Mall Presbyterian Church) and commit his life to promoting its philosophy around the world.

Contemporary newspapers compared

the Rev Patterson to the 19th Century Capuchin friar, Father Theobald Mathew from Cork, who inspired an estimated seven million people around the world to give up drinking.

The Rev Patterson said it was the harrowing sights of 'trampdom' that first inspired his idea. The huge numbers of



Robert J. Paterson as pictured on the frontispiece of his book Catch-my-Pal

homeless people he came across living rough and dying on roadsides, hay sheds and pigsties, affected him deeply.

After nearly 20 years preaching he gave up the security of the manse to become a 'missionary tramp'. Years later he could remember exactly what he was doing at the very moment on July 13, 1909 when the 'Pal's' movement took hold in his mind. He was debating the 'trampdom' problem with church elder, John Elliott when the phrase 'catcher of men' came to him.

For him it was divine intervention, a

God-given insight that the problem would not be solved by becoming a travelling preacher or even by establishing a charity for the tramps, but by tackling the root cause, drink.

Within months his abstinence work had so overwhelmed his ministry that in 1910 he announced his intention to

leave Armagh to take full time control of his new movement. 'Third Armagh' was sad to see him go and the reverend and his wife were guests of honour at a farewell dinner in The Swan Café, Armagh in September 1910.

At the height of his fame he was in demand all over the world and wrote two books "Catch-My-Pal" in 1912 and in 1914 "The Happy Art Of Catching Men: A Story Of Good

Samaritanship". In just one year, 1913, he travelled 21,000 miles in the USA and Canada.

While the Rev Patterson's background is not well known it seems he was born in 1868, the second son of Samuel and Margaret Patterson (nee Ranton) at Whitecross, County Armagh and brought up by an uncle who was a minister at Bray, County Wicklow.

The Rev Patterson appears to have retired from the 'Pals' after his English wife died while he was away speaking in Australia. He came home to be with his

two sons and was installed in the Crumlin Road Church in 1919 and remained there until 1930.

Between the wars, as lounge bars flourished and alcohol became more respectable, the movement floundered. It had been born at a time when temperance movements provided a social outlet and while it outlasted groups like the White Ribboners, the Rechabites, Band of Hope and the International Order of Good Templars, it couldn't compete with movies, ballrooms and bars.

Today the 'Dunmurry Pals' remains the only surviving link with the halcyon days of temperance. In the early days the members did not merely forswear drink but were activists going about pasting 'My Goodness, My Guineas' over Guinness posters. Ironically today one of their stops would be on Kingsway Drive where

the snooker club has been dispensing Guinness for decades.

Down the years the Dunmurry club has evolved to accommodate community demands and its founding father would be proud of the social club that today is built around golf, darts and snooker. Along the way it has produced some of Ireland's top amateur snooker and billiards players including Maurice Gill who won the All Ireland championship twice and the NI title three times.

Another legendary figure was the all-rounder Tommy 'Tucker' Taylor who was NI billiards champion, club chairman and a footballer who reputedly played 628 consecutive games for Distillery and was capped for the All Ireland League team.

Among the memorabilia held by the club is an unusual heavily weighted rest for a

snooker cue. It was specially designed for one-armed players and is thought to date from the First World War when so many limbless veterans returned from France.

In Armagh, where it all began, the last tangible sign of the movement disappeared in 1960s when the organization's first headquarters, the Catch-My-Pal Hall, a tiny tin and wooden hut on Lonsdale Street was demolished to make way for a car park.

The hall's other claim to fame was that it was probably the first place the infant Ian Paisley heard the evangelical oratory that was to become his hallmark. His father the Rev James Kyle Paisley was founder and first pastor of Armagh Baptist Church, which rented the hall from the 'Pals'.



Head of Procession—No. 1 New Banner, Boys' Brigade Band, and Women's Branch.

A Catch-my-Pal procession making its way through Market street, Armagh in July 1910. (Photo - Armagh Guardian 22 July 1910)