

Armagh a century ago

- through the eyes of the local press

by Mary McVeigh

At the time, it was hailed as the ‘the greatest blessing of all’,¹ what was it? If this question was asked in a general knowledge quiz today chances are that few would be able to answer it yet according to one of the country’s top economic historians, Cormac O Grada, it ‘was arguably the most radical and far-reaching piece of welfare legislation enacted in Ireland in the twentieth century’.² The Old Age Pensions Act, passed at Westminster in 1908, came into force on the 1st January 1909 and certainly significantly improved the lifestyles of many.

Henceforth men and women over the age of seventy whose annual means did not exceed £31 10s were entitled to a pension on a sliding scale with a maximum of 5 shillings. This was a considerable sum at the time bearing in mind that an unskilled labourer in rural Ireland might expect to earn no more than double that in a week and for unskilled women workers in Irish towns, weekly wages generally were no more than seven to twelve shillings.

The advent of the pension was the cause of much comment in the press both locally and nationally. In its first edition of the year *Ulster Gazette* ‘wished all old age pensioners a bright and happy New Year and long life, happiness and prosperity to enjoy their pensions’

“In Armagh there was a tremendous gathering of pensioners but owing to the excellent arrangements made by the postmaster no delay occurred in cashing the pension orders and in a very short time upwards of 300 old people had been sent away rejoicing.” it reported.

It went on to add some pertinent points on the issue. Apparently upwards of 26,425 lbs of silver was expected to be paid out in the first week throughout the British Isles and if the coins were placed on top of one another they would make a pile considerably over two miles high’.

The paper did not, of course, reveal the source of this information.

First person to get the pension

The *Armagh Guardian* also did not miss out on the pension news. James Jones of Ballinahone was at the post office at seven o’clock in the morning and thus ‘had the distinction of being the first to receive the pension in Armagh’. According to the paper,

‘many people did not believe the good news could be true and it was with doubtful fears that they approached the office to walk away happy, with their money tightly clasped in hand’.

It reported that the Milford post office paid out over £40 in pensions on the first week and indeed one recipient was supposed to have ‘politely requested the post master and ex-post master to name their favourite drink and he would bring it from town’. An old woman from Tandragee who was in very straightened circumstances and totally dependent upon her daughter for her livelihood apparently instructed that her first payment be given to her church as an offering of thanksgiving.

Regrettably there were some pensioners who did not live long enough to enjoy their new wealth. Both local papers recounted sad stories

‘On Sunday James Jeffers 73 died suddenly in the townland of Tammanmore. Deceased had been in his usual health in the morning and was preparing to do some weaving when he took a weak turn and suddenly expired. Deceased was in receipt of an old age pension of 5s weekly, being one of the first claimants passed here’.

the *Armagh Guardian* noted and the *Gazette* recorded:

‘On Friday the deaths took place under tragic circumstances of two Lurgan old age pensioners. James Uprichard was in the act of dressing

himself in order to proceed to the post office to draw his pension when he suddenly expired. Charles Gibbons, an old rag gatherer entered the post office in the afternoon signed his name and received his 5 shillings and immediately collapsed. On arrival at the workhouse hospital he was found to be already dead.’

Happy to be seventy

The number of pension applications throughout Ireland exceeded all expectations. This was hardly surprising bearing in mind that the compulsory registration of births did not come into force until 1864 so hard evidence of peoples’ ages was hard to find. Initially many relied on either clergymen or medical personnel to support their claims. The *Irish Times*, with evident tongue in cheek noted:

“With fewer inhabitants than Scotland by a quarter of a million, Ireland has established claims to nearly 774,000 more pensions. This surely is a major tribute to the longevity of our race, and the healthy character of our much abused climate”.

The local press was just as quick to comment. The *Ulster Gazette* observed that the alacrity with which the old people – even the female element now recognise their 70th birthday is noteworthy. It reported that there was a townland in Middletown where the amount to be paid out in pensions in the year was £108 whilst its entire yearly rent was £104, a record that would be hard to beat. The following week it pointed out that every locality had its own characteristic.

“Clady district seems to hold the county record for old age pensioners just as Middletown is noted for its accidents, Tandragee for its bad water and Annaghmore for strawberries”.

It was not too long however, before there was a review of the process and documentary evidence from the censuses of 1841 and 1851 had to be supplied at a cost of 2 shillings per applicant which certainly cut back on the clamour for pensions throughout the island.

Dan's desk auctioned in Armagh

One person who probably did not need to seek a means tested pension was the man who bought Daniel O'Connell's desk when it came up for auction in Armagh in May 1909. How a piece of furniture belonging to the main mover in the campaign for Catholic Emancipation in early 19th century Ireland, whose home place was County Kerry, and who had no known links with this part of the world ended up in Armagh was indeed intriguing. The Ulster Gazette, however, was able to throw some light on it. Apparently the desk had been purchased 'many years' previously in Dublin at an 'enormous' price by a 'Dungannon gentleman'. The Gazette's view was that the desk, apart from its 'interesting historical associations' was 'extremely valuable as a piece of furniture' because it was made of black oak with ornate hand carving. A small brass plate bearing an engraving of 'the Liberator's name' was attached to the front of it.

The Armagh Guardian on the other hand, was very dismissive about the item. It was of the view that the pedestal writing desk had possibly been made by a 'humble admirer of the great Dan' as it was 'not too finely carved on the legs and back' and the wood was 'not highly polished'. It reported that the desk only brought in £12 at the auction and was bought by a dealer after 'very feeble bidding'. Interestingly the auction was advertised in the Gazette only which undoubtedly caused the Armagh Guardian's caustic comments and according to the Gazette the new owner was actually a tailor from Glasgow, a Mr C.S. Nimmo.

First passengers on Keady train

Of far more interest to the people of Armagh and surrounding districts than the fate of the mighty Dan's desk the following month was the start of a passenger service on the Keady railway line.

"As the 9.08 train from Belfast steamed out from Armagh on Monday morning an engine with composite carriage quietly took its place.

"Keady train and train for Keady were called out by Head Porter Lappin for the first time in history. There were not many passengers but a large number of people on the platform to see the first train depart, though it was understood that that the Keady people had been of the opinion that if the train had made its first trip on a bank holiday a large number of people would have been induced to visit the Callen town. Few did so however, but Keady was so happy in securing the much wanted communication that it did not notice the absence of a crowd of visitors"

There were five trains a day each way and each journey took 25 minutes with a halt at Irish Street. Stops at Lislea and Milford had still to be built but until they were completed it meant that the line could not serve the intermediate line mills. The Armagh Guardian was critical of the service offered and took the view that it was 'too restricted to the early and middle part of the day as no trains left Armagh after 4.20pm.

"Keady people cannot spend the Saturday afternoon in Armagh nor can they stay in Belfast or Warrenpoint later than 3 o'clock. This bad arrangement must surely be altered" it declared.

'Magnificent temperance demonstration'

All trains into Armagh, from Keady and elsewhere were crammed for one of the city's main events of 1909. This was a big temperance rally on 27th June and attendance at it must surely have rivalled any of Daniel O'Connell's 'monster' demonstrations of the previous century. Indeed the Armagh Guardian reported that 17 special and two ordinary trains 'vomited forth' almost 10,500 people, most of them total abstainers

"from all parts of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese and also Monaghan and Cavan who joined the Total Abstinence Societies of the Armagh parishes in the first annual re-union of the Roman Catholic Total Abstinence Societies in creating a public opinion in favour of sobriety and against drunkenness".

This event was covered in depth by both local papers who constantly crusaded in the cause of temperance, aware that drunkenness was the cause of much misery and crime. Weekly there were reports of affrays due to over indulgence of alcohol ending up in local courts throughout

the Armagh area. In April the Armagh Guardian noted that there were over 60 public houses in Armagh which was too many whilst Lurgan, with a bigger population, managed to get by with 28. It was high in praise for Mr R.G. McCrum of Milford who had recently bought up a licence of a pub but not for the purpose of selling alcohol. Instead he was going to open a temperance cafe.

There had obviously been ample preparations for this 'magnificent temperance demonstration'. A hundred and eighty stewards marshalled the participants who arrived to find the city festooned with decorations, primarily in shades of white, yellow and green.

"Banbrook Hill, Lower English Street, Cathedral Road, and Thomas. Ogle and Irish Streets were decorated for the occasion with Venetian masts, bunting and gay decorations swung across the roadway, those at the entrance to the cathedral being particularly fine. At Lower English Street large gilt letters on a green ground declared Ireland Sober, Ireland Free."

Many houses displayed papal insignias and Lower Irish Street was singled out for the amount of decorations displayed by its residents

Local names still around

The proceedings began with a procession to the Cathedral for High Mass and then a further procession to Abbey Park complete with banners and bands connected to temperance sodalities. There was some hymn singing along the way including 'Hail sweet temperance how we love thee' It is interesting that the list of officials of temperance guilds, both male and female, who acted as stewards, contains many names which are still about in Armagh today: Messrs Thomas Brannigan, Chas. Herron, John Sherry, John Webb, John Campbell, John Bunting, Patrick Loughran, John Corrigan, Thomas Martin, Thomas Dolan, James Kelly, Henry Loy, George Willis, Francis Vallely, Patrick Fegan, Joseph Short, Andrew Hendrick, William Colgan and Thomas McGerrigan. The ladies were: Mrs Webb, Mrs Savage, Miss Walker, Miss Corvan, Miss Loughran, Miss McParland (Milford), Mrs McGarity, Miss Digby, Miss O'Hare, Miss

Margaret Cullen, Miss McKenna, Miss Lennon, Mrs Flynn, Miss McKeown, Miss McNeese, Miss McCourt, Miss O'Hanlon and Mrs McGarvey.

Among the many dignitaries, both lay and clerical, who attended, was the Nationalist MP, Willie Redmond, brother of the more famous John, who died in 1917, during the First World War in a field hospital of the 36th Ulster Division in Belgium after being wounded in battle. His vacant parliamentary seat for East Clare was won by Eamonn DeValera. It would seem, from the press coverage that the MP was not among the speakers who were many and included Father James Cullen who started the Pioneer Total Abstinence Society which is still going strong today. Cardinal Logue opening proceedings said in his very lengthy address that the event was 'the largest meeting it has been my lot to see gathered for any purpose. Temperance would forward home rule, he thought:

"If ever we wish to be free, if ever we wish to be prosperous, if ever we wish to make ourselves worthy of freedom we must put the vice of intemperance under our foot, stamp it out of the country, until finally the Irish people will have a character of for the virtue of temperance which they have long had for the virtue of chastity and purity".

Another speaker, Father Michael Quinn, Administrator in Armagh came out strongly against use of intoxicating liquor at wakes, funerals, christenings, harvest gatherings, sealing of bargains at fair and markets and giving drink as Christmas boxes.

Rev Patterson's admiration for Pioneer priest

It was just weeks later that a Protestant temperance body which spread beyond these shores as far as America began in Armagh. It was the *Catch My Pal* movement; details of its origins are recounted elsewhere in this journal by Eric Villiers. In his book, published in 1914, the

Rev. R. J. Patterson referred to his admiration for Father Sheerin, a Catholic curate who started a branch of the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association in the city before being transferred to Crossmaglen. At a meeting in Killylea Orange Hall in late October when the Rev Patterson was outlining the progress made of the *Catch My Pal* movement he paid

'a warm tribute to the good work done in the cause of temperance by the Rev. Father Sheerin and said that in Portadown where they hate the pope like poison',

he had got three ringing cheers for Father Sheerin.

The new City Hall

Many of the older folk in Armagh still fondly reminisce about events in the old City Hall but how many of them know that it first opened its doors in December, 100 years ago? To mark the occasion the Chairman of the Council, Mr Michael Short, was presented with a

'golden key engraved with the city coat of arms and bearing an inscription stating the occasion on which it was presented'.

Both local papers devoted much column space to the official opening and the speeches of the local dignitaries congratulating themselves on erecting Armagh's first municipal assembly rooms. This new building which was effectively a reconstruction and enlargement of the old Tontine which the council had earlier purchased with this in mind, and much to the concern of some who feared a big increase in the rates. It transpired that their worries were in vain because the new building and its furnishings cost some £4,000, less than half the cost of the Newry Town Hall and was, in the view of the builders, worth £6,000. The architect was the Principal of the Armagh Technical School, Mr J. Caffrey, the builder was Mr R. Cullen, Portadown, the painting was carried out by Mr J. Maxwell, the plumbing by Messrs Hillock and Mr H. G. Leeman supplied the blinds. According to the Armagh Guardian the exterior of the building was in the 'classic Renaissance style with mouldings around the windows and a balaustrated top'. In the centre was



The City hall shortly after it was built

a representation of the city coat of arms. The stage was described thus:

‘It is entered by an ante room and opening off it are dressing rooms with lavatory arrangements and a window by which scenery can be lifted in from the lorries.’

The ball went on all night

The Ulster Gazette reported on the ‘very enjoyable ball’, held after the official opening and attended by over 100 couples. Up to eleven o’clock spectators thronged the stage and gallery but the dancing went on to half five the next morning. The catering was carried out by James Irwin and was deemed highly satisfactory. One of the first concerts to be held in the new hall was under

the auspices of the Armagh Glee Singers, advertised for 21st December. It would appear to have been a successful evening by all accounts. The Armagh Guardian reported: “Over a hundred and fifty reserved seats were taken, the balcony was packed and the shilling seats under the balcony were all extremely well filled, showing that the humble class of Armagh has a love of good music. The spacious well warmed City Hall is indeed a welcome change from the old dirty, cheerless and cold Tontine, and was much appreciated.”

The Christmas Post

“On Christmas morning the night mail train was two hours late and in

consequence the outgoing mails and city deliveries were much later in leaving the office...Elsewhere the pressure seems to have been equally great. Letters posted in Dublin on the 22nd were not delivered in Armagh until the 25th or 26th, and London letters were four days in the way,” the Armagh Guardian noted. Have we really progressed much in a hundred years?

Endnotes

¹ O GRADA, C. ‘The greatest blessing of all’: the old age pension in Ireland, Past and Present, 171(1), pp. 124-161

² Ibid.

‘History Armagh’ now in sixth issue

The publication this month of the latest edition of ‘History Armagh’ brings to six the number of magazines published by Armagh and District History Group, a non-profit making trust, since 2004.

Over the years the publications have been well received throughout the area and we would like to thank all those who have supported us including the shops and outlets that stocked magazines. We deliver copies to around a dozen main Armagh outlets but if there are some we are missing in your locality please let us know. Contact details are on page 12 where you can also find a membership application form. In addition to publishing the magazine the group meets monthly and organises occasional outings to places of interest. Meetings take place on the second Wednesday of the month at 7.30pm in the Irish and Local Studies Library in Abbey Street, Armagh. Each month the meetings take the form of an informal talk by amateur or professional historians on an eclectic mix of subjects.

Recent talks have included a look at dance hall music and bands from the 1940s and 1950s; the origins of local place names and, last month, an analysis of the development of the language and culture of Travellers that prompted one of the longer discussion sessions from the floor, which is always an important part of the evening’s meeting. Everyone is welcome to come along and see for himself or herself what the group has to offer.



Members of Armagh History Group, enjoying a visit to Killeavy old church (above), and attending one of their monthly talks, (below)

