

Armagh's Victorian Shops

by Sean Barden

Introduction

We treat the computer generated receipts that spew out of supermarket tills nowadays as mere scraps of paper that usually end up as litter. They fall into that category of document known as ephemera, originally meaning something that lasts just a day.

During the latter half of the 19th century almost all traders used their receipts or billheads as advertisements but unlike today they were often quite decorative. As the century progressed and printing technology improved the artistry employed became more intricate and flamboyant. It is probably the scarcity of these old receipts and billheads together with the information they contain that contributes so much to their attraction. Armagh County Museum's billhead collection provides us with an insight into Armagh's commercial life spanning two hundred years. The collection was established by the museum's first curator T G F Paterson and a note by him on one of them is dated January 1928.

Paterson was then working in Couser's, Armagh's premier grocery shop in Upper English Street and many of the receipts are for goods or services bought by Mr Couser. Several also bear a ragged hole through their centre, suggesting they were rescued from Couser's office spike by Paterson who recognised them as historical documents.

Like a jigsaw puzzle this collection

requires time and patience to bring the pieces together but once a few links are established, an exceptionally detailed picture of Armagh emerges. This brief examination should convey a taste of the collection and also of commercial life in

the nineteenth century.

William Ferris's billhead of 1853 is a good example. It left customers in no doubt where his shops that sold "tea, coffee and spices; genuine old whisky, prime Port and Sherry", once stood. The caption states "observe: --

No. 47 Market street, Opposite the Market House" and "No. 1 English Street, Corner of Market Street". Anyone familiar with the city centre today will recognise the corner on the north side of market street and know that for years it was occupied by Speedy Cleaners and before that Zweker's barbers shop. The premises opposite the Market House are also easy to locate. That building now serves as the branch library and the row of shops opposite, stretching from the corner of Scotch Street to McCrum's Court was where Ferris's shop stood.

Having established that billheads can tell us where their owner's shops once stood, what other uses can they be



The Albert House, Upper English street

Armagh during the nineteenth century. It also shows how the billheads can be employed as local history "tools".

Locations

Billheads are useful when trying to locate business premises in the nineteenth century streetscape. Although old directories can also be used, they generally do not include house numbers until the end of

put to?

The Albert House & hotel

If a series of billheads survive for the same address over a long period, observing changes in ownership and function can tell us a lot about commercial trends and the evolution of local businesses.

The Albert House was a name associated with several establishments that succeed-

ed each other in Upper English Street. In the 1840's the Albert Hotel under the auspices of John Fegan flourished here.¹ This was a predecessor in name, but otherwise unconnected to the Lower English street hotel that stood on the corner of Albert Place until the 1970's. Fegan died in August 1849 and the business was taken over by James Matchett who continued the hotel until at least 1862.²

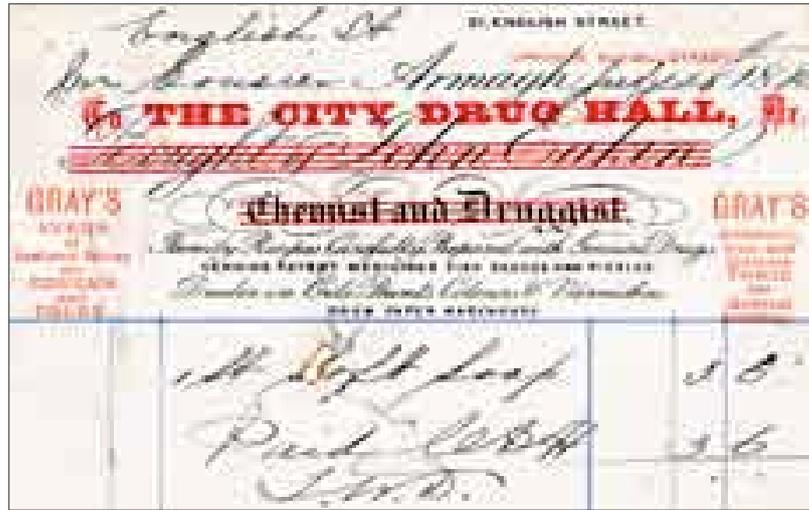
By 1864 the hostelry had closed and Thomas Reilly had established a hardware business there.³ "The Sign of the golden key" was added by Reilly around 1868 to the established name while keeping the original. Although the shop appears in the directories two years later by 1879 it too had closed. In July of that year The Albert House was home to a Woollen Draper and Haberdasher by the name of T.J. Oyston who may have only had a brief spell at the address.

However, by the 1890s a Mr David Ferris & Co, had opened a shop in the premises that still retained the old name and built on Reilly's line of business. It is described as a "family grocers, tea dealers, Seed and Italian Warehousemen etc.,". Ferris sold everything from cakes, chocolates, drugs and perfumes to room-papers, mirrors, paints and brushes. Ferris was declared bankrupt in 1897 and in November of that year the premises were put up for sale.⁴ By the spring of the following year it was rumoured that the large grocery chain Lipton's were planning to open a branch in the town and it is interesting to read that fears were expressed of the effect their arrival would have on local traders. Lipton's took over the Albert house and had a grand opening on 12 July 1898.⁵ For most of the twentieth century they occupied the premises until the place was devastated by a bomb in the 1970's.

Today (2004) the building still stands opposite the Ulster Bank in Upper English street but is divided between a café and a clothes shop. A small

but tangible link with the building's past can still be discerned high on the old red brick façade. The painted words "Albert House" are faintly visible above the

during the 1850s. He could also "carefully prepare" horse and cattle medicines on the premises. When John Eakin took over the shop at 21 English Street in



1881 he added the assurance, "late Thomas G. Peel" to his new billhead. Eakin carried on Peel's veterinary business too, indeed the only image appearing on his billhead is the slightly misleading one of a horse. Eakin was quickly recognised as an

modern shop signs.

Gray's chemist

When the owner of a successful business died or retired the name was often assumed by the new proprietor who doubtless hoped their association with one of familiar reputation would ensure continued good custom.

Thomas G. Peel, chemist and druggist, advertised his "patent medicine, perfumery and spice warehouse"

accomplished pharmacist in his own right and by 1883 all mention of Peel is gone for his receipts. Gone too are the references to horse and cow medicines, he now concentrated on human remedies.

Thomas Peel himself was an interesting character. While still conducting his business he was becoming one of Armagh's leading citizens. As early as 1863 he was showing an interest in local politics as one of the Town Commissioners that year and by 1870 was also acting as coroner. In the mid 1880's he rose to become Town Clerk and was both a controversial name in local politics and frequent target for the local press.⁶ As owner of the Ulster Gazette in the 1890's he was involved in a libel case that ended his venture into the world of journalism.⁷

Getting back to Peel's chemist's shop; Mr. Eakin ran it for just five years and a receipt of 18th July 1886 introduces new owners. This billhead was one of Eakin's that had been sent back to the printers for alteration. His name is partially erased with red ink and below in the same ink "Gray's syrup" and "Gray's aromatic iron and quinine tonic" are advertised. The new owner also added the helpful information, "21 English Street, opposite



Russell Street”.

In June 1898 they had opened a branch at number 61 Thomas Street. By 1903 John Gray was operating from an address at number 24 English Street

Gray’s still flourishes as a chemist’s shop, probably the longest established in the town and with the aid of a few billheads we have traced its origins and back to its predecessors in the mid-1800’s.

Undertakers

Many businesses, rather than risk specialising in any one product or service, tended to combine several to ensure economic survival if competition or circumstances demanded a change. Sometimes the variety of products offered were obviously related, other times the connection is harder to understand.

The billheads from Alexander Frizell’s cabinet-making and upholstery business [illustration] at the Seven Houses in English street, as expected describe the range of furniture manufactured there but also add, in an almost matter of fact way, “funerals supplied”. Actually Frizell’s was Armagh’s leading undertaker during the late nineteenth century and arranged the funerals of some of the most prominent and wealthiest locals.⁸ However receipts which relate to the funerals of two Armagh men make more interesting reading. When George Scott died in December 1865 the bill sent to his representatives, itemised what was provided to ensure the funeral went according to plan. Four months later the funeral of Thomas Scott produced a similar bill from Frizell.

Comparing the two documents the most noticeable difference is that George’s funeral had more official mourners, needing fourteen “shoulder scarfs and bands”, thirteen pair of kid gloves and thirty three hat bands. Thomas’s friends were supplied with just eleven, twelve and fifteen of the same accoutrements. Neither was the transport at Thomas’s funeral as grand, the hearse and pair cost just 7/6 compared with ten shillings for George’s hearse plus a further £2-10-0 for five mourning carriages and a further 12/6 to pay the five hired drivers.

George’s mourners also had nine crapes costing £1-19-0. Overall George had the more expensive funeral but the surprising aspect of the two bills is that while George was sent off in a “best stuffed oak coffin” costing £3, Thomas was supplied with a “full mounted oak coffin in black cloth” costing £5. It seems that while one of the deceased’s families lavished quite a bit on making sure the mourners at the funeral were well turned out, a better quality coffin was for some reason the priority of the other.

Shoemakers

The billheads make clear that if a street numbering system existed in Armagh, it was yet to supersede older ways of identifying individual premises. Striking landmarks were easier recognised as were well known neighbours. R J Johnson, “military and gentlemen’s boot and shoe depot” was located under the “sign of the mammoth”, a gigantic black boot that we must assume hung over the shop door. Upper English Street was Johnson’s address but for anyone still unsure of the shoe shop’s location, a further clue helped, “(second door from Mr Wiltshire’s Hotel)”. Wiltshire’s hotel was probably the oldest and best known hotel in Armagh, and was better known as the Beresford Arms. It is now (2004), home the Bank of Ireland.

Another shoe making establishment, Hughes’s conveyed a more solid traditional image describing their profession imaginatively as “boot builders etc”. This long established business had been plying its trade since 1811 and Sarah Hughes had taken over from the “late William Hughes”. In 1861 Hughes’s was situated at 46 Scotch Street “(opposite the Post Office)”⁹ but by September 1862 Sarah had moved to more central premises in Market street.

There must have been strong competition among Armagh shoemakers for in 1865 there were twenty one operating in the town.¹⁰ Perhaps the rivalry had reached the stage where an attention-grabber like Johnston’s “Mammoth” or Hughes the “boot builders” had to be employed to attract custom.

Gardner’s foundry

Armagh Foundry was one of the most fascinating local industries in the 19th century. It was owned by the Gardner family and operating from Dobbin Street. The billheads offer a tantalising introduction to this local industry. They could execute many types of metal working, for example iron and brass casting, manufacturing of pumps, gutters and pipes and “gas work of every kind”. They also made fireproof iron safes, field gates, tomb railings, ploughs and churns. Brothers Samuel and Edward Gardner ran the place up until to late 1850s but by 1861 the names of Sam Gardner and son began appearing on billheads. When Samuel Gardner died aged 79 in March 1871 he was not only a respected business man, he was member of both Armagh Toll Committee and Town Commissioners and a director of the Armagh and Newry railway company.¹¹ Less is made of their capabilities on later billheads, the firm’s reputation was by then well-established and it was enough to simply state with confidence, “Engineers and Mill-wrights”. Indeed they collaborated with local innovator and mill-wright James Cullen of Callan street during his development of an early water turbine.¹²

A unusual example of Gardener’s work, can still be seen near Armagh and is actually a protected historic monument. Armagh Observatory’s meridian markers, are abandoned relics of nineteenth century astronomy and two of them stand on Tullyard hill just north of the city. Consisting of a stone archway beside a stumpy iron obelisk forged in the Armagh foundry they are a familiar if enigmatic sight to travellers on the Loughgall road.

printers

Several printing presses operating in Armagh during the nineteenth century and Perhaps the best known was McWatters “general printing, bookselling and

stationery establishment". The eleven billheads from McWatters' company span 51 years from 1834 to 1885 during which time the business operated from 17 Upper English Street. John McWatters' signature appears on many of the

15s 6d.

McWatters printers continued [get info from directories] when Robert's widow sold the premises to MA Bell [who he] then the cake shop [look up directories]

of excitement to glimpse in such detail an Armagh shop interior as it was when Thomas street itself was a new development, being just forty years in existence at the time.¹⁵

This introduction has merely scratched the surface of the collection but it hopefully gives a flavour of the billheads and in a small way an insight into the commercial life of Armagh in the nineteenth century.

References.

¹ Seanchas Ard Mhacha Vol 11 No. 2 1985 p420, "Gravestone Inscriptions in sandy hill", Ed. Patrick Hamill., "Here lie the remains of John Fegan late of the Albert Hotell (sic) of the city of Armagh who departed this life 18th August 1849 aged 72 years".

² Armagh Guardian 8 May 1914, "Old Armagh, An Octogenarian's reminiscences...";

³ Griffith Valuation, Armagh Union, Armagh Parish, p337. Thomas Reilly leasing from James Moore a House office & yard, No. 78 Upper English Street.

⁴ Armagh Guardian 15 Oct 1897, 12 Nov 1897

⁵ Armagh Guardian 4 Mar 1898, 8 Jul 1898

⁶ Belfast & Ulster Directory, various years.

⁷ Barden, S., *The Last Countess*, 2002, p81

⁸ Funerals handled by Frizell included Mrs Bond of the Argory, (Armagh Guardian, 5th February 1892), Miss Katherine Pooler, one of the last of that old Tyross family, (Armagh Guardian feb 1892) and the third Earl of Charlemont, (get ref)

⁹ The Scotch Street Post Office was housed in one of the fine old stone buildings that form the terrace below Leonard Dobbin's house, later the Bank of Ireland and now St Patrick's Fold.

¹⁰ Belfast & Ulster Directory 1865

¹¹ Armagh Guardian, 24 March 1871

¹² Gribbon, H. D., *Water Power in Ulster*, 1969, p30; DP Martin photo collection, No.240, Armagh County Museum.

¹³ Armagh Guardian, May 16 1879

¹⁴ Armagh County Museum, Newspaper cuttings book 5, p18a

¹⁵ James Stuart, *Historical memoirs of the city of Armagh*, 1819, p443



bills throughout the years but by October 1878 John's son John is running the business. Old John died the following May aged 74.¹³ A few years later in 1881 the name heading the company paper is Robert P. McWatters for by then John had sold the business to his brother. By then they had expanded their interests and taken over the premises next door at 15 English Street.

Earlier in the century, Morgan Jellett had been McWatters' predecessor and by the 1820's was employing a young John senior as assistant. John married Jellett's daughter and on his father-in-law's death took over the business continuing the old name until 1834 when his own first appears.¹⁴

The information contained in McWatters' receipts is interesting too. For instance, some early ones record stationery sold to the cathedral authorities in connection with the extensive renovation work at the old Cathedral during the 1830's. Workmen's books, passbooks and sheets of drawing paper were bought during the spring of 1834, the latter it is presumed for use by the architect to sketch the proposed changes. The following March 300 resolutions were printed "of subscribers to Cathedral" and cost

Conclusion

If we find it enjoyable and informative to browse through these Victorian leftovers then John McWatters, Samuel Gardner and their customers would be amused if they knew the close attention now being paid to them. Old billheads are a valuable tool that can be easily used to explore so many aspects of our urban history. If a large enough sample are available then tracing a business's rise, prosperity and decline is possible or they can show which streets were favoured by certain types of trade. A single receipt is just as valuable though, recording as it does a small part of everyday life from a time long gone. How else would we know that William Donald paid Anthony Donnelly £6-19-10 for painting the interior of his shop in Thomas street. That the window sashes were white, the counter tops mahogany and the doors underneath "chocolate". The shop interior comes to life when we read that the sliding doors were tastefully coloured light blue and the edges of the shelves, mouldings and cornice were of a contrasting green. That this decorating contract was carried out during August 1799 somehow makes the information all the more interesting. It creates a buzz