

Red Ned's

The story of an Armagh Pub

by Mary McVeigh

In these days of increasing globalisation, mergers and take-overs the small family business is almost a thing of the past. Thus it is gratifying to know that one which has reached a century is still going strong in Armagh. On 23rd January 1907 the licensed premises now known as 'Red Neds' passed into the ownership of Edward O'Neill and has remained in his family ever since. Edward was succeeded by his son Sean who in turn passed it to his son, Malachy, the current owner.

Before Red Ned's

Trying to piece together the pub's history prior to its passing into the hands of the O'Neill family proved to be a fascinating quest. The leases date back to 1876 but it has been possible to establish that Armagh people were able to buy drink there for at least 50 years before that, from at least 1819. The First General Valuation of Ireland carried out in the 1860s when rates were introduced to pay for the upkeep of workhouses was the initial starting point because the exact location of a property can be pinpointed on an accompanying map. Indeed it is a very valuable source for both local historians and genealogists because it lists all properties by area and provides not only the value of each at that time but also the name of the occupier and that of the person from whom it was leased. According to the Armagh valuation carried out in 1864 the property was leased by one Henry Savage.¹ It is interesting that this property which consisted of a 'house, offices, yard and small garden' was valued at £30 and this was the highest in the street. Two properties valued



Red Ned's c.1950 showing the side entrance on Chapel Lane

at £20 each were held by members of the McKee family but most of the other premises were valued under £10.

Henry Savage

Between 1828 and 1840 a valuation of townlands was carried out throughout Ireland and although this was primarily a valuation of lands it also cited the value of houses which were £3 and over and from 1838 those worth £5 or more. Luckily for local historians in Armagh a man called Charles W. Ligar had the foresight in 1839 to publish the Armagh listings from the original manuscripts.² Here Henry Savage can be found in Ogle Street and, as later, the property has a high valuation. It was valued at £23 and at that time was the second highest in the street following the house and stores of George Barnes which were deemed to be worth £30.

Evidence from directories

A perusal through the accounts of the Town Commissioners in 1845 revealed that Henry Savage paid the sum £1.10.0 for local amenities.³ At the time the average amount collected from Beresford Row on the Mall was £2.6.0 which surely indicates that Henry Savage's business was not insubstantial?

The next stage in the search was a rummage through trade directories because they are a useful source for tracing businesses though it has to be remembered that not all businesses are listed. It would appear that those accounted for paid for the privilege and there may have been times that some may not have considered the expense necessary or justified. Henry Savage appeared in Slater's Directory of 1846 but there was no mention of his business in Lennox's Directory of 1840. However, he was listed in Pigot's

Directory of 1824 and even earlier in Bradshaw's Directory of 1819.⁴ These entries are a bit misleading because they give his address as Thomas Street. At first it would appear that he had moved from Thomas Street to Ogle Street but it would seem that this was not the case because there are no entries anywhere in these directories for Ogle Street. Two other publicans, Mary Treanor and Linton Walsh whose addresses also were given as Ogle Street in the later directories appeared in Pigot as belonging to Thomas Street. It would seem that the compilers of these directories were not as accurate as they should have been! Whilst the streets were originally one, known as 'New Street' however, from 1759 were named in memory of Thomas Ogle, who had been Sovereign of the city many times between the years 1729 and 1763.⁵

Although there was no mention of Henry Savage, the publican, in Lennox's directory he was recorded in it as being a Town Commissioner. In fact he held this office from 1836 to 1842. He was also a trustee of old St Malachy's Church in Chapel Lane and was on the building committee for the erection of the Catholic cathedral.⁶ There is no doubt that he was a person of some standing in the community. Unfortunately, however, it has not been possible to find out much more about him or his family. His gravestone inscription in the old Sandy Hill cemetery stated that he was predeceased by his wife Mary who died on 5th June, 1866 aged 36 years and two young children who died within a year of one and other, two little girls aged 2 and 8. When he died in 1869, aged 75.⁷ his death was recorded in both the Irish News and the Armagh Guardian but there was no

obituary which might have thrown some light not just on his public and personal life but also might have revealed some information on the pub: did he inherit it, buy it as a going concern or was he the person who started it?

When a priest owned the pub

There is a gap of seven years between the death of Henry Savage and the signing of the first existing lease when it has not been possible to verify who was in charge of the business. Surprisingly the lease dated 29 June 1876 stated that the property 'formerly occupied by Eugene Quinn in Ogle Street and adjoining premises in Chapel Lane formerly occupied by Mrs Mary McCourt' was passing into the hands of Thomas McCann from the Rev. John McKegney for 31 years at £31.4.0.per annum. There is no mention in the any of the trade directories of a publican named Eugene Quinn so one can only assume that he was either an employee or tenant of the Rev. McKeg-

ney How this priest came into possession of the lease must remain a mystery until further research is carried out. It could well have been that he was bequeathed it by Henry Savage who would seem to have left no heir and would appear to have been greatly involved in church matters. Although Rev. McKegney was a native of Carrickmore in County Tyrone he received his early education in Armagh, at St.Patrick's College and from his ordination in 1858 he spent 27 years as a curate in Ballymacnab before going on to be parish priest of Aghaloo. According to his obituary during his long stay at Ballymacnab he made 'numberless friends by his winning ways and good heart, which never failed to show itself even in his most casual acquaintance.'⁸ In this instance his 'winning ways' may have awarded him with a public house!

Thomas McCann - family grocer

Thomas McCann was described in the next lease as a 'family grocer and wine



Edward O'Neill at the door of his premises c19????

and spirit merchant' so it would appear that it was now possible to get more than alcoholic beverages on the premises. He was not long involved in the business however, because just three years later, on 7th August, 1879 he signed it over to his son Nicholas Vincent on the understanding that both he and his wife, Anna-Marie, would be looked after. He had 'recently become delicate in health' and thus had to relinquish the reins. A number of McCanns are buried in the old Sandy Hill Graveyard but this particular Thomas McCann would not appear to be among them and without the date of his death looking for his obituary would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

The third lease noted that Nicholas Vincent McCann made a will on 18th February 1893 leaving his wife, Alice, the lease and all the fittings which he had bought

John Conway

This partnership was short-lived because Conway bought out Rafferty three years later, in June 1897 for £500 on the agreement that he would not set up in competition in licensed premises in Armagh or within ten miles of it for ten years. Conway, obviously a cautious soul was taking no chances! It would appear that he did prosper in Ogle Street. According to the 1901 census Conway who was married with four young children all under the age of four, at the age of 28, employed no less than 3 servants and an apprentice. He had two domestic general servants, Lizzie and Agnes Cosgrove, a porter, Patrick Mallon, and the apprentice was none other than Edward O'Neill, then aged 18, who was to succeed him as the new owner. John Conway gave his occupation in the census as 'grocer and

who gave him a glowing reference which has been kept in the family (see illustration) he moved to Belfast where he was employed in the Albert Hotel. During this time he met his future wife, Sarah Vallely from Ardress who was nursing in the Mater Hospital. For the first ten years Edward O'Neill rented the business from Conway who had emigrated to Boston for the sum of £40 for the first year and then £50 for each of the following nine years. In 1917 Conway was bought out completely.

In an interview, Mary O'Neill, Edward's daughter who spent all her adult life working in the bar, recounted the pub's more recent history. Her father who was one of nine children and from a farming background used to close every Wednesday when he would take the bus out to Dromconwell to assist his brother Eoin on the family farm. The farm still remains in family hands and Edward's grandson, also named Edward has restored the old farmhouse in its original style. Many of the pub's customers were people from the areas surrounding Dromconwell who came in on their bicycles and sat always in the same seats. Even today their descendants still frequent it and indeed some of today's regulars are the third generation of their families to drink in 'Red Neds', both people from the countryside and locals. The pub was conveniently placed directly across the road from Harry Irwin's betting shop for those who wanted to discuss form and slake their thirsts at the same time. It was also just across from the premises of Kirker's bottling plant and mineral water company which later moved to Dobbin Street before closing in 1980 and Mary recalled Major Boyd, the proprietor who always wore a red rose in his button-hole bringing over his customers to treat them. There was never much of a passing trade except for lorry drivers who sometimes stopped on the way to Enniskillen. This of course was before the building of the Ring Road in Armagh when the through traffic westwards had to go up Ogle Street. On 17th March and 15th August when there were band parades



Edward O'Neill's letter of reference from John Conway when he left Armagh to work in the Albert Hotel, Belfast

for £220. This was indeed fortuitous because he died just three months later, on 21st May. The Armagh Guardian reported that he had passed away 'at the comparatively early age of 36, after a six week's illness'.⁹ The lease signed on 8th March 1894 stated that Alice McCann was selling up and the new landlords were 'shop assistants', John Conway and Patrick Rafferty. It did not indicate whether or not they were employees of the McCanns.

spirit merchant' so it would seem that like the McCanns he also was involved in more than the drink trade.

Edward O'Neill

After running the business on his own for ten years John Conway obviously decided to move on so he was duly succeeded by Edward O'Neill who was more than well equipped to meet the challenge. After serving his apprenticeship with Conway

The Central Council of
The Retail Licensed Trade of Northern Ireland
A BODY INCORPORATED BY LAW
ASSOCIATION PRICE LIST
(1957)

Whiskies	1	1	Per Glass
Special Whiskies	1	1	
Cognac Brandy	1	1	
Other Brandy	1	1	
Rum & Gin	1	1	
Port and Sherry Wines	1	1	
Australian & S.A. Wines (Full Strength)	1	1	
Lager & Export Beers	1	1	Per Bottle
Quality Beers	1	1	
Light Beers (Half Pint)	1	1	
Large Export Beers and Porter	1	1	
Irish Stout	1	1	
Strength Porter and Light Beers	1	1	Per Pint
			Per 1 Pint

All bottles charged for when being carried out
New York and other cities 1957-1958, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025

Price list from the bar showing the cost of drinks in 1957

in the town some of the bandsmen used to leave their instruments in the pub's gateway in Chapel Lane. Not everyone who visited the pub was of the two-legged variety, however. Every Saturday night the local huntsmen complete with their pack, about 12 hounds, took over one of the two drinking rooms. Mary remembered one occasion when a cow which was either being driven to or from the market at the Shambles made its way into the pub and it took some persuasion and a lot of pushing to get it to vacate the premises. Needless to say it was not offered any refreshment!

Why "Red Ned's"?

How did the pub come to acquire its name? The answer is simply that Edward O'Neill was red-haired. During the Second World War when American troops were stationed in Armagh those who made the pub their local addressed him as 'Red'. Some of these kept up correspondence with the family, sending Christmas cards and letters, until they died. The last was received just a few years ago. In war-time the pub had to close sometimes when it ran out of supplies.

Other O'Neill pubs

Over the years Edward O'Neill expanded his business interests in Armagh by buying another two pubs. One in Navan Street, the Navan Bar, since demolished to make way for the Ring Road was run by his brother Paddy and another in Thomas Street, now known as the 'Gas Lamp'. He later sold the Thomas Street premises to a County Tyrone publican called Michael Devlin and thus acquired a daughter-in-law, in a manner of speaking. Sean, his son, who joined him in the business met Bernie Devlin, also a nurse like his mother, and later married her.

Many changes

In the hundred years since the O'Neill family took it over the pub has changed considerably and has expanded in size. Mary remembered when the only heating was a gas ring behind the bar. Later in wartime there was a big heater which warmed the customers who sat along a bench. In the early days there were three snugs with doors and the few female customers who were always of advanced age since respectable young women did not frequent bars were enclosed in these to imbibe of their little glasses of 'Palladium' wine. There was only one barman ever employed in Edward's time, Joe Devlin of Callan Street whose brother, Mick, worked in the Navan Street premises. When Sean ran the bar indoor toilets were installed and the old drinking rooms were converted into a stylish lounge area which greatly pleased the women drinkers who, by this time, had increased in numbers and decreased in years. Sadly Sean passed away at the untimely age of 65 in 1996 and the pub was taken over by Malachy who had worked with him. In 1999 he completely refurbished and expanded the business taking over an additional two properties in Ogle Street, a house which had been

inhabited by the late Sean Wallace, who had been employed in Kirkers before retirement and an adjacent building which had previously been a greengrocery. The pub which is furnished to the highest standard now attracts a younger clientele as well as the older regulars but the old traditions still hold good. It is still very much a sporting bar where punters can watch the horse racing, discuss form, celebrate wins and drown sorrows and football enthusiasts can view matches on big screens and hold post mortems on results. It has been in existence for up on 200 years and maybe longer and hopefully it will be still flourishing for as long again and more in the future.

Endnotes

- ¹ General Valuation of Rateable Property in Ireland. Union of Armagh (part of). Valuation of the several tenements comprised in that portion of the above-named union situate in the county of Armagh, Dunlin, 1864.
- ² City of Armagh. The government valuation of Armagh which enumerates the name and amount valued of every holding in the city, Armagh, 1839
- ³ Account of all the monies raised and paid, fines and forfeitures levied under the Act of 9th George IV, Chapter 82, in the city of Armagh, 31st July 1845 by order of the commissioners.
- ⁴ Slater's national and commercial directory of Ireland...., Manchester and London, 1846 The new commercial directory of Armagh, Newry, Londonderry ... Derry, for William Lennox, 1840 Pigot and co's city of Dublin and Hibernian Provincial Directory, London and Manchester, 1824 BRADSHAW, T., General Directory of Newry, Armagh ..., Newry, 1819
- ⁵ PATERSON, T.G.F., 'Harvest Home', Armagh, 1975
- ⁶ 'Old St Malachy's, 1752-1938' by T.G. F. Paterson and Pdraig O hAdhmaill in 'St Malachy's Church, Armagh Golden Jubilee 1938-88 edited by Reamonn O Muiri.
- ⁷ 'Gravestone Inscriptions in Sandy Hill Graveyard, Armagh City' by Pdraig O hAdhmaill in Seanchas Ard Mhacha, vol. 11, no.2, 1985
- ⁸ Irish News, 30th July, 1901
- ⁹ Armagh Guardian, 26th May, 1893