

The Dirty River

Armagh's hidden watercourse

by Sean Barden

Although this little stream has been called less offensive names in the past, generations of local people have known it simply as the Dirty River. Victorian sanitary engineers unkindly described it as “main sewer No. 12” but it was always a natural watercourse and in the eighteenth century was popularly known as the Scotch Street river.

To locate its source we must travel a few miles south of Armagh to the rising ground near Ballyheridan and Cavanacaw. Rainwater from the hills feeds small streams that grow to become the Dirty River. These insignificant tributaries flow north into the Primate’s demesne where they merge and continue through what is now Armagh’s golf course.

Parkamore lake

As can be seen in Fig 1, these streams pass between the long ridges east and west over which the Newry and old Fews roads struck out from the town. In this badly drained basin, prior to the 1760s they gathered into a stretch of water known as Parkamore lake. (see Fig 2) Parkmore or Parkamore was the name given to the area that from the 1620s had been set aside by Primate Hampton as demesne land.¹ When Primate Robinson decided to erect his Episcopal Palace nearby, the lake was drained as part of the landscaping of the area. Such a stretch of still water was considered by Robinson’s architect unnecessary and probably detrimental to Robinson’s health.²

River’s course

Nowadays on leaving the demesne the stream flows through a succession of tunnels and pipes beneath the city streets before joining the Ballynahone River about a mile north of the city near St. Luke’s

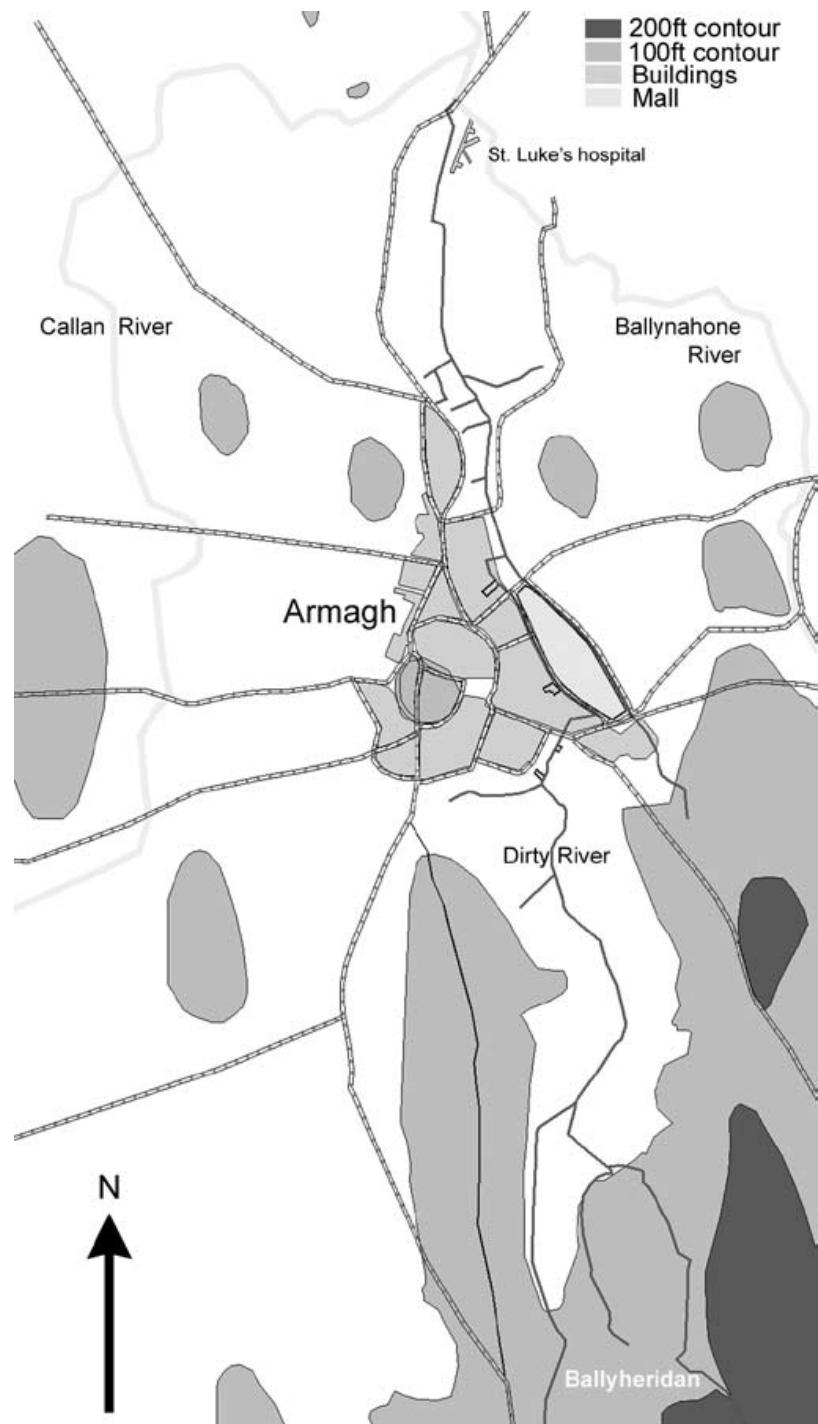


Fig 1. Topography of Armagh showing drainage (compiled from OS 6" = 1 mile, map 1908 revision)

Hospital. When it ran on the surface it would have emerged from the demesne and flowed behind Dobbin Street then passed under the Scotch Street bridge.³

From here it made its way northwards alongside the town Commons before they were enclosed and became the Mall. This ground lying between the urban

slopes to the west and the long ridge to the east where the Barracks and St. Mark's Church now stand was marshy and uncultivated. The river lacked momentum in this part of its course. While it fell some 60ft on its route through the demesne, there was only 13ft of a fall along a similar distance, from the south (prison) end of the Mall to the north of Banbrook hill.⁴ Another small stream called the Pound River flowed from the heights behind the prison and along the east side of the Common, merging with and swelling the Scotch Street River close to where the Court House stands today.⁵

The land immediately north of the Common between the Observatory Hill and Banbrook Hill was also wet and marshy. Numerous irises and other water loving plants grew here and it was commonly known as the flag meadows.⁶ The Dirty River continued north through Gillis, and the grounds of the Asylum. It joined the Ballynahone River just a few metres from the latter's confluence with the Callan at Drumcarn.

Flooding

The Dirty River acquired its name because in the latter half of the nineteenth century it served as the city sewer. As the city expanded the stream became the conduit that inefficiently carried away the waste from the town. It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century following many years of debate and disagreement as to its function that most of the stream's urban course was piped. Out of sight however was not always out of mind and a disadvantage of constraining the river in underground tunnels became obvious

during heavy rain. The volume of water leaving the demesne on these occasions simply could not be accommodated by the tunnels so the river reverted to its old course above ground. When this water spilled into the enclosed Mall there was no exit and the resulting floods have become legendary in local history. The most notorious and best recorded occurred in October 1958 but as can be seen from the photo taken in 1928 the Mall was flooded on many other occasions too.

Utilising the river

Over the past 150 years this watery nuisance has gradually been consigned to its underground course but it was not always seen as a detrimental feature

and polishing Armagh Marble from a race commencing at Parkamore lake but it ceased work when the lake was drained in the 1760s.⁷ On its lower course the slight fall was not suitable for powering mill wheels.

Armagh's Tanners

The leather tanning businesses that were common in Armagh during the nineteenth century took advantage of the slow flowing stream. The rows of pits in which the hides were processed make them distinctive and instantly recognisable features on plans of the city.⁸ On closer examination it is apparent that the majority of Armagh's tan yards lay close to the banks of the Dirty River.

Tanning in Armagh has a long history and as far back as 1664 a John McGeough had a tan-house at the lower end of Scotch Street.⁹ In 1698 John Ogle is recorded as a tanner in Scotch Street. Half a century later a descendant of Ogle furnished the town with a new street and the McGeough family were to become well known proprietors of country estates north of the city in the nineteenth century. That their forbearers made their living tanning hides suggests this business was a lucrative one.

Locations of tanneries

Fig 4 shows there were several tanneries alongside the Scotch Street river. William Gardner had a tanyard beside the stream at 22 Dobbin Street from as early as the 1830s. The 1839 valuation plan of Armagh shows 23 vats here but



Fig 2. John Rocque's Map of Armagh, 1760 Rivers darker, (North top)

to be buried beneath the ground. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it provided an effective service for local industries. For instance Thomas Ogle operated a water-powered mill for cutting



Fig 3. The Mall flooded after a thunderstorm in 1928

PRIVATE COLLECTION

by the 1860s the tannery seems to be operating on a less extensive basis for there were just seven vats then. By 1864 John Wynne was running this business and leasing it from the Reps' of John Barnes.¹⁰ (No. 1 in Fig 4)

Nearby at No. 4 Barrack Street Robert Barnes's tanyard had 18 vats in 1839. Twenty three years later they too were operating in a less extensive way having just eight vats marked on the 1862 plan. Richard Redshaw was now in possession of the business, leasing it from John & Robert Barnes. (No. 2 in Fig 4) Barnes's fortunes were mixed and Robert was declared bankrupt in 1849 and his tannery in Scotch Street assigned to one William Simms.¹¹ The Barnes family had a long association with various tanning businesses in Armagh for in 1839 William Barnes was in possession of a dilapidated tan yard alongside the Mall, again located on the Dirty River. Although it is shown with 24 vats in 1839 its poor state is reflected in its low valuation which was a mere tenth of Robert Barnes's Barrack Street premises.¹² Some of the large oak lined vats from this tannery were uncovered during the construction of Sainsbury's supermarket on the site in 1998. (No. 3 in Fig 4).

Further north John Stanley's tannery at

College Street is the largest shown on the 1839 plan with 52 vats. (No. 4 in Fig 4) His associated stores nearby indicate a thriving business. Another indication that the tanning trade was a lucrative one was Stanley's Regency villa nearby; The Pavilion. During development of the tannery site in 2002, the pits were uncovered and excavated by archaeologists from the Department of the Environment. For a short while the regular rows of deep pits were open to the air. (see fig 5)

In the 1830s Thomas Craig and William

Davidson owned another tan yard close to Stanley's operation behind premises on English Street that would later become the Charlemont Arms Hotel. Unlike the sites already mentioned their tannery was not on the banks of the stream but it was in close proximity and might have used the convenient water supply.

There were a few other tanneries in Armagh but the intention here is to illustrate that the Dirty River attracted leather producers to particular areas of Armagh where they could take advan-

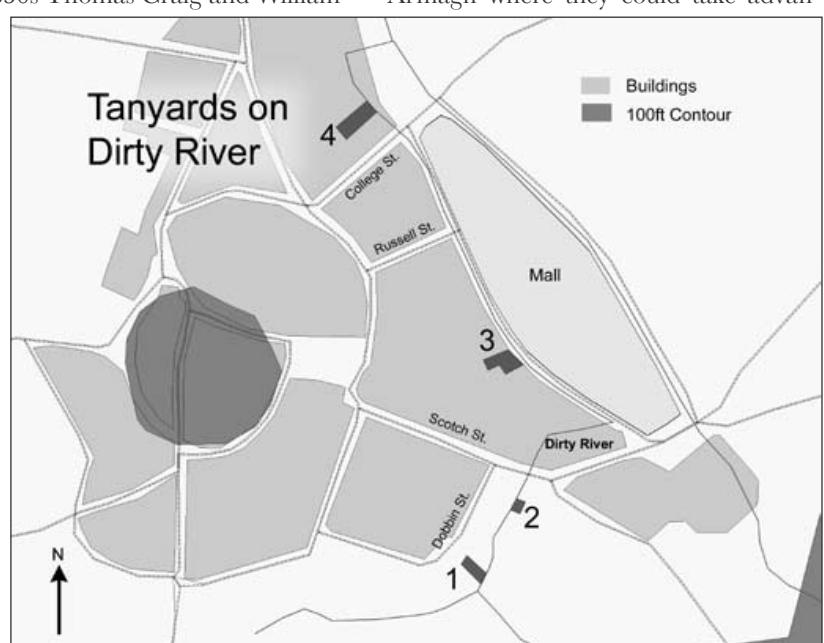


Fig 4. Location of Tanyards in Armagh, Compiled from several 19th century OS plans of Armagh

tage of the free water supply they needed for their industry. Unlike other important urban centres, Armagh cannot boast a sizeable watercourse. The Ballynahone and Callan rivers east and west of the city are only now being incorporated into the expanding townscape. The modest and unfortunately named Dirty River did however serve the city well despite its periodic floods. We walk and drive above it every day without noticing and it is fascinating to realise that a little piece of Armagh's history continues to flow as it has for centuries a few feet below us.

References:

- 1 Harris, Walter; *The Whole Works of James Ware*, 1739, Vol 1, p98,
- 2 Rogers, Edward, *A Record of the city of Armagh*, 1861, p9;
- Malcomson, A.P.W., *Primate Robinson 1709 - 94*, U.H.F., 2003, p31
- 3 A faint echo of this feature remains in the name of a block of flats at the junction of Barrack Street and Newry Road called Bridge House.; See also D. Fitzgerald's article elsewhere in this issue.
- 4 Data taken from contours and spot heights on 6 inch = 1 mile OS map, 1835, 1864 and 1908 editions; "Section of drain down east side of Mall to railway" Armagh County Museum, Accession. No. 101-1990
- 5 An unpublished lecture on the duties of the Town Sergeant. Armagh County Museum collection.
- 6 Armagh County Museum, *Armachiana* Vol 4, p63
- 7 The mill was sited close to the ruins of the Franciscan friary. Stuart, James, *Historical Memoirs of the city of Armagh, Newry, 1819*, p447, p504
- 8 1835 (5ft-1mile) OS plan; 1839 Valuation plan; 1862 (1/500) plan; 1889 (1/500) plan
- 9 Primate's Rentals 1664, abstracted by T.G.F. Paterson in Armagh County Museum library.
- 10 Griffith Tenement Valuation, 1864.
- 11 Armagh Guardian 09/04/1849 This is probably the tannery marked No.2 here, as it was situated where Scotch Street meets Barrack Street.
- 12 Townland Valuation, 1839



Fig 5. Site of Stanley's Tan Yard during excavations in 2002

1839 Valuation						
Street	Occupier	No. on fig 4	Lessor	Description	Valuation	Notes
30 Ogle St	Thomas Kierans			Offices and Tan Yard	£11	36 vats shown on 1834 plan but none on 1839 Valuation map
22 Dobbin St	William Gardner	1		House, office & Tanyard	£29	23 vats on 1834 plan but 22 on 1839 Valuation map. Same as 49 Dobbin Street below
4 Barrack St	Robert Barnes	2		House, office & Tanyard	£44	Site of Scotch Street carpark. 18 vats on 1839 Valuation map Same as 39 Scotch Street below
5 Ireland's Entry	William Barnes	3		Office & Tanyard (dilapidated)	£4-18-0	Near Sainsbury's carpark Mall West (2005). 24 vats on 1839 map. Ireland's Entry was old name for McCrum's Court
17 College St	John Stanley	4		Tannery	£23	Rear of 26 & 27 Upper English Street, 52 vats on 1839 map. See fig 5 above.
35 Upper English St	Thomas Craig & William Davidson			House office & Tanyard	£34	No vats shown on maps
75 Lower English St	James Bennett			House, office & Tanyard	£17	No vats shown on maps.
Griffith Valuation 1864						
39 Scotch St	Richard Redshaw	2	John & Robert Barnes	House, office, Tanyard & garden	£30	8 vats on 1862 plan. Including 1 acre of land valued at £5, value of buildings £25
49 Dobbin St	John Wynne	1	Reps' John Barnes	House, office & Tanyard	£35	7 vats on 1862 plan