

# Chapel lane of the Past

## The Story of three houses

by Vincent Turley

Taking three houses in Chapel Lane, Armagh as his focal point Vincent Turley traces the development of the town's 'little palaces'. His research ranges from Marshal Bagenal's 1586 description of, "a small village having the Church and the Fraries there, for the most part defaced", through the centuries, and on towards his own mid-twentieth century childhood recollections of one of the city's oldest streets.

Armagh in the sixteenth century hardly extended beyond the confines of its single main hill, where a handful of mud cottages or "creetes", each with a little garden, were scattered higgledy-piggledy down the slope. Overlooking it all was the old Cathedral and adjacent ecclesiastical edifices, from which the principal thoroughfares radiated, intersected only by lanes and byways.

According to an 1618 survey, conducted mostly for properties owned by the 'See of Armagh' (the Church of Ireland), there were only two stone houses, with the natives and settlers domiciled in 'creetes' - which appears to be a corruption of the Irish 'creathach' - "a house made of wattles, covered with straws and rushes and removable from place to place to the convenience of the owner". (See O'Neill Lane's Dictionary)

The native Irish appear to have been contemptuous of the Anglo-Irish preference for stone buildings. In 1608 'creetes' or beehives as they were also known, having developed from ancient vernacular dwellings, were outlawed. Often made from interwoven willow, straw or rushes, they were sometimes erected with "cople" or cobblestones cemented together by a thin coarse mortar or grouting, which was poured into wall joints.

Another inferior type of house had mud walls made of red clay mixed with straw and saturated with water to form a rough cement. Cottages as we know them developed slowly as designs got more ambitious, introducing rectangular constructions with gables ends and a roof supported by "forked props".

Though primitive by modern standards these old houses had distinct advantages because of their orientation and the presence of an open hearth in the centre of the house. The morning heat of the rising sun hit living rooms, while the thatched roof secured an equable temperature, cool in summer and warm



in winter.

Another advantage these prototype cottages enjoyed was that they were inexpensive to build, even allowing for different currency values. As late as the beginning of the 19th century the cost of a comfortable cottage was estimated as: mud work and plastering £ 3. 8. 3d; roofing £ 1. 14. 1d; thatching and straw £ 2. 5. 6d and leaded windows £0. 11.4d

Chapel Lane as it is today probably began taking shape sometime before 1660 when Armagh was being described as a 'town'. That year there was a rent

survey of tenements with garden plots belonging to the See of Armagh and it included St. Brides Street, which presumably became Chapel Lane after the building of St. Malachy's Church in 1752.

Ten houses recorded in the survey of the lane - all 'creetes' with "forked gables" - were occupied as follows: Leonard William, William Walton, Tirlagh O'Hagan, Widow Coddan, Donnell Mc Gowan, Matthew Blade, Brian O'Lowell, Edmond O'Moghery, John Hanlon and Neale Mac Murky.

In Lodges Survey of 1770 seven houses were listed in what was by now "Mass Lane", with heads of households as follows: Brian Donnelly, labourer; Terence Ghegan, labourer; Pat Mc Cann, labourer; Brian Mc Guigan, butcher; Thomas Fanning, tailor; Martin Kennedy, labourer; Susan Mc Quade, who was "very poor".

It wasn't until Griffith's Valuation in 1864 that the dwellings got street numbers and the three houses, all owned by landlord John Douglas, are listed as: No 1, Joseph Mc Finn, yearly rent £2. 10.0; No 2, Michael Keenan yearly rent £2. 10. 0 and No 3 unoccupied.

The 1901 census for No. 1 shows the Hurley family - father, mother and two daughters (aged 4 & 3) with their father's occupation given as domestic servant.

At No. 2 are the Fegan family, with 21-year-old William, head of household, working as a plumber and gas fitter. William was born in County Antrim and his wife Sarah is aged 20. Alice Haughey is listed as their mother-in-law, aged 49 and a general serv-

ant, born in County Monaghan. She could not read or write. Also living there is Bridgit Haughey, a sister-in-law aged 24 years. She is unmarried and works as a preparer in a spinning mill. All four are recorded as Roman Catholic.

A review of the 1906-1916 street directories at Armagh County Museum, reveals continuous occupancy in the early nineteenth hundreds of numbers 1, 3 is not consistent, sometimes switching to Nos. 1, 2 and 3. Meanwhile tenants' names too changed quite rapidly as families perhaps grew and moved to bigger and better houses.

In those 10 years it can also be seen that the majority of family names, like McKenna and Hughes, McCann and McBride, have not only survived locally until the present day but have flourished. At Nos. 1, 3 and 5 respectively in 1906 were, John Birmingham, John Mc Kenna, James Burns; in 1907 the only change was at No. 1 now vacant; in 1908 in the ascending order it was Mary Hughes, Philip Golen, and another vacancy; by 1913-14 Patrick Kernaghan, Mary Cooke, had moved in beside the stubbornly vacant No. 5; while in 1915-16 it was Catherine McCann and Catherine McBride living alongside a No. 5 becoming ever more neglected.

Both the turnover of residents and apparent continuity of vacancies suggest the structures of all three were losing out to time. By the 1930s, as people moved on or died, no one replaced them leaving the houses to be boarded up and left derelict.

Improving transport no doubt played a role in ending the practice common in early modern Ulster of building shelters from the timber, stone and clay that was to hand. In the end the stone house law, pressed by people living in Anglo-Irish areas, won out over "creetes" and in time Armagh's commercial and street directories would proudly boast of the city's 'many fine stone houses' as the days of just "two stone houses" receded.

#### References

- 1 Griffiths Valuation, Co. Armagh 1864.
- 2 Seanchas Ard Mhacha 1955 p 125 - 130.
- 3 Coote Statistical Survey of

## Post war memories of the lane

My earliest recollection of Chapel Lane was of visiting my mother's sister Mary Crowley at No. 1 Chapel Lane, where she lived with her husband Paddy, son Frank and daughter Marie. It seemed to me as a young child that they always lived there, as growing up, I would "call in" frequently to listen in on gossip, the latest news, get a treat or deliver a message from my mother to aunt Mary.

From what older relatives tell me they had been living there since the early 1930's. My cousin Frank was an apprentice butcher and worked in Harry Corr's butcher's shop, at the bottom of Ogle Street on the right hand side going down. When he qualified as a City and Guilds master butcher he joined the P & O Line and worked as a ship's butcher on liners cruising the world.

A particularly vivid memory I have from the 1950's was of my aunt Mary going out one morning to Mrs. Lot's shop, a short distance away for some groceries and leaving the pan on the gas cooker. The inevitable happened, the pan caught fire and set light to the house. It was in the summer time and it was not long before the Fire Brigade arrived and rescued my cousin Marie, who was up in bed sleeping. I was nearby and hearing the fire engine went to see what was happening and was just in time to see my cousin being taken down the ladder in a fireman's lift. The house was gutted but thanks to the generosity of neighbours, friends and fundraising events, it was restored to its former glory.

Next door the neighbour was a lady called Mary Denis who was unmarried and lived alone at No. 2. She was very fond of cats and usually had up to ten cats at any one time living with her. Mary was a very religious lady and attended Mass most days in St. Malachy's Church. She was a very small woman and children found her 'scary' because of her unusual facial features. Every day she walked to the Sacred Heart Convent to collect milk in a little can, which had a handle on it, and she became a familiar figure coming along Navan Street from the Convent, carrying her little can. Mary ended her days in a geriatric unit within St. Luke's Hospital.

Mr. Mick Higginbottom and Mrs. Kate Higginbottom, who lived next door to Mary in No. 3, were my great uncle and aunt. Kate was my mother's maternal aunt. Mick was originally from Dublin and Kate was his second wife, his first having predeceased him.

All these families were among the last people to live in those three little houses that down through the ages provided home and shelter for generations of Armagh citizens.

Armagh, p 252.

4 Stuart, *History of Armagh*. p 545.

5 1901 Census. (*Armagh Hist. library*)

6 *Armagh City Maps, 18th and 19th century.* (*Armagh Hist. library*)

7 *Memories of relatives living in 1 and 3 Chapel Lane, 1930's - 50's.* Vincent Turley.

8. *Street Directories 1906 - 1916.* Co. Armagh Museum.