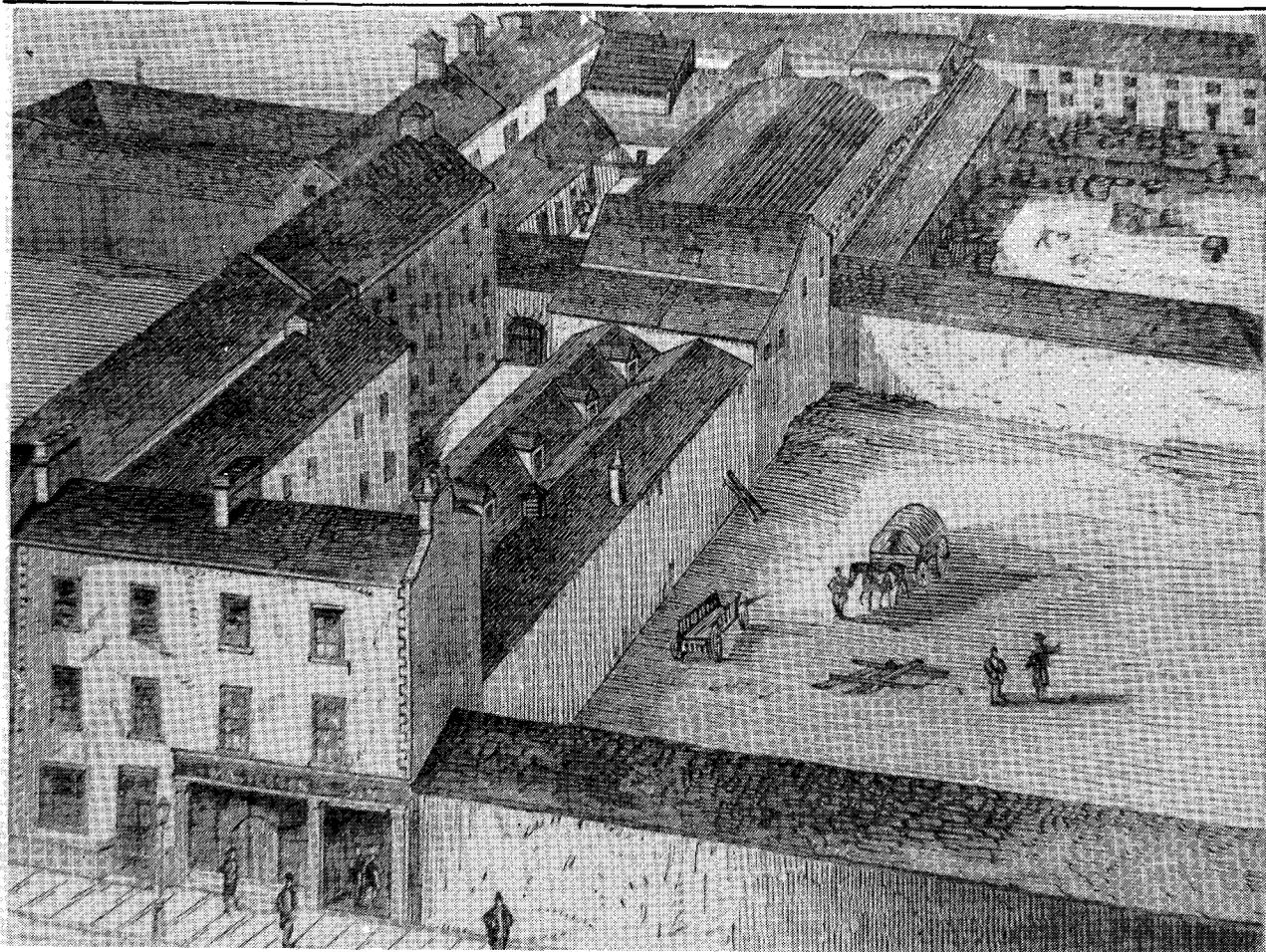


Limerick's bacon factories

By Paddy Lysaght



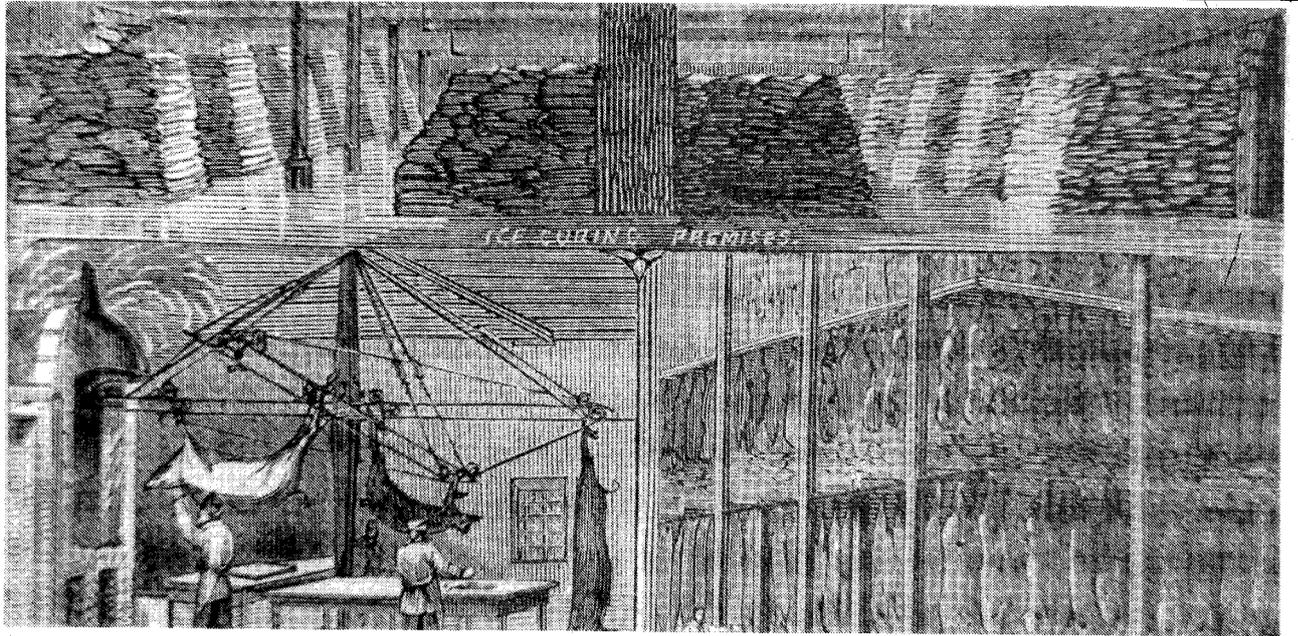
Matterson's bacon factory, from George Measom's "Guide", 1866.



For much of the last century, and indeed for well over half of the present one, Limerick's importance was directly attributed to her three well-known bacon factories, namely, J. Matterson & Sons, Roches Street, established in 1816 by Mr. John Russell, a Cumberland man in conjunction with Mr. Matterson, using the method of curing then current in Berwick-on-Tweed. W.J. Shaw & Sons, founded in the year 1831 at Mulgrave Street by William John Shaw, a descendant of a County Down family, and O'Mara's bacon factory, Roches Street, which had its origin in Mungret Street some few years before 1839, when James O'Mara from Toomevara started curing bacon in the basement of his house there. Apparently, this basement business flourished, for in 1839 he moved to Roches Street to the premises it occupies today.

About the middle of the last century, for some reason now difficult to fathom, Limerick bacon and especially Limerick hams, became well-known for their excellent flavour throughout the English-speaking world. It is on record that Glasgow curers in an effort to produce hams equal in excellence to those of Limerick, imported Limerick workmen who were supposed to know all about the way in which the meat was turned out at home. Apparently, they did not bring secrets with them for their efforts were unsuccessful,

There were also much larger bacon factories in parts of the British Isles; for instance, Belfast is reputed to have exported four times the number of hams produced in Limerick, and places like Glasgow and Liverpool had several factories producing very large quantities of bacon as well. None of them, however, quite matched those produced in the three local factories for flavour and



Sections of the inside of Matterson's, from Measom's "Guide", 1866.

quality.

Fortunately, we have valuable and well-documented accounts of the operation of two of these factories. They are too long to give here, but as both accounts are a little over elaborate and at times uninteresting, they can only benefit from the deletions I have made in both cases.

Firstly, let us see what Stratten's **Commercial Directory for Limerick** of 1892 has to say about Shaw's ham and bacon factory in the two quarto pages devoted to it.

The anonymous author states that W.J. Shaw & Sons is the second largest bacon curing establishment in Europe, and that from its earliest inception its progress and development has been phenomenal. Apparently, about one hundred and fifty thousand pigs per annum were killed there — an extraordinary number when you come to think of it.

"In ordinary times", he writes, "work commences at 6 a.m. and lasts until 9 a.m., by which time some 400 to 500 animals are daily operated on — an average of over two per minute. For the purpose of slaughter the pigs selected are ranged in a number of pens, and are driven thence one by one ... to the place of execution. Directly the animal approaches the spot it is seized, passed head downwards along a stout iron bar, and immediately receives its **coup de grace** before it has probably realised the fact of its suspension in mid-air. The body is then transferred to the singeing house, where, after about fifteen seconds of exposure to a strong heat, the hair is readily removed. The animal is then subjected to a thorough 'douching', which renders the skin perfectly clean and agreeable".

Then, after decapitation and the removal of the internal organs, the pig is conveyed to the refrigerating chambers — vast stone-paved vaults, where the carcasses are hung to be cooled. When thoroughly cooled they were taken to the pickling rooms, where (and I quote) "in company with thousands of others, the portions are "cured" on the most scientific principles. Into these 'chambers of death' no daylight penetrates, and here science comes to the aid of the large body of workmen who operate in this department. Electric lighting is resorted to as a cooler medium of illumination, and the introduction of this force for the purpose has been most satisfactory. The portions intended for the Saxon palate are packed in canvas after having been branded, and are dispatched in their green state". The account goes on: "In the curing of hams the most skilful efforts of the operators are necessarily put

forth. The hams having lain in salt for a considerable time are taken out and passed through the hands of workmen who cut, pare, and shape them".

The hams are then taken from these pickling rooms, "to kiln-like chambers, some thirty feet high, crossed and re-crossed at intervals from within a short distance from the floor to the ceiling with iron spiked racks. The green hams, cured with salt and appropriate spices, are suspended on these spikes, and the chamber heated from beneath. The combustibles fill the chamber with a dense smoke, which imparts the delicate brown colour so grateful to the eye of the epicurean connoisseur. When this operation is completed the goods are practically ready for the market. The heads are conveyed to pickling tanks, whence they ultimately issue to provision merchants throughout the kingdom. What is termed the "offal" is now largely utilised by the firm in the manufacture of such dainties as sausages; while such items as kidneys, liver, heart, feet, and cuttings find a ready market in the English metropolis and the large provincial towns. The lard produced is the pure fat of the animal. The lard refinery is a newly-erected structure, from whence rails are laid down which run to the railway siding. A remarkable feature of the entire establishment is its cleanliness and freedom from objectionable sights ... most of the immense supply of water necessary to cleanliness is obtained from seven springs in the vicinity of the factory. Wheresoever we direct the enquiring eye throughout this mammoth establishment we find the evidence of marvellously perfect equipment and admirable administration. From the magnificent suite of offices down to the ice-cold vaults and outhouses we see the electric light installed. On the upper floor is a miniature railway running from various parts of the building to the opening, beneath which is the railway siding. There are lifts to every floor, while telephonic communication to an exceptionally complete extent has been established".

The anonymous author concludes by thanking A.W. Shaw for the courtesy extended to him during his visit to the factory. Apparently W.J. Shaw, the then manager of the Limerick works, was a man of many parts — vice-President of the Chamber of Commerce, a Liberal, President of the Protestant Home Rule Association, a writer and debater on political subjects and actively interested in sport and athletics.

With its electric light, its telephones and its

cleanliness, for its time, it was undoubtedly a most impressive industry, worthy of the high praise bestowed on it by our author and many others as well.

George Measom's description of Matterson's, which he visited in 1866, is equally interesting, and possibly more so because of the illustrations of the various sections of the factory which accompanied the article.

Measom was commissioned by the railway authorities to compile an illustrated guide to the Great Southern and Western Railway. Because he could write well and was an old hand in the production of similar guides, the variety of information it contains and its manner of presentation is much superior to many similar accounts given by other travellers of the period.

On arriving at a particular town, he gives a short resume of its history and antiquities, which though interestingly written, is usually nothing more than an abridgement culled from some local history. Added to this, however, he gives an account of some of the most important shops and factories in the town. Thus having arrived in Limerick, and having given us the usual hackneyed descriptions of King John's Castle, St. Mary's Cathedral, the Treaty Stone and all the rest, he adds 12 pages devoted to what he heads "Commercial Aspects of Limerick, namely, a description of J. Matterson & Sons, William Todd & Co., and the Newgate Brewery. A full-page line engraving of each of these establishments is also included, which, as I have said, adds enormously to his well-observed accounts.

The following abridged version is what he has to say about J. Matterson & Sons:

"Of all the interesting establishments in the south of Ireland, few are more prominently before the public than that of the Messrs. Matterson, one of the first of its kind in Ireland. Messrs. Matterson have fitted up their stores with an upper flooring of iron, containing ice. In Limerick and Waterford only is this system in practice of curing bacon by means of ice through the Summer months. The ice is brought from Drobak, in Norway, and every year large quantities are imported by Messrs. Matterson, who have a most extensive trade, and have created for Limerick its reputation for prime bacon ... Hams with 'Matterson' branded upon them, command, we understand, a larger price in the market than those cured by any other curer in Ireland. Of their excellence the writer can, from personal knowledge, bear willing testimony."

Meason continues:

"We will request the reader to accompany us through the Roches Street Provision Curing Establishment. Entering from Roches Street, which runs from George Street, the chief one in Limerick, the offices are on the left hand, from which we pass through a large shop, and proceed to the Sausage-making department, the make per week being **one ton for Dublin** alone, in addition to a large quantity manufactured to supply local demand. The "of-fal" room is 60 feet by 40 feet; it contains 8 vats filled with pigs' heads, each vat or cistern holding about one thousand heads; but one of the most extraordinary departments is the '**hanging-house**'. Here, suspended by the heels, may be seen eight hundred pigs, the killings of two days. Near to the 'hanging-house' are the clerks' desks, and adjacent stairs leading to the large **Stensil Plate** room, joined by loft, capable of containing **eight thousand** hams.

The visitor will, under the guidance of one of the intelligent partners, now descend to the **curing house** or 'beds', where he would see **mountains of bacon** for the Irish market in salt. This 'house', one of several, is **one hundred feet** in length, and adjoining is the **ice house or iron-room**; it is filled with **hundreds of tons of bacon**, and above this room is stored **five hundred tons**

of ice. The whole of the bacon in this room is for the London market, and is an ordinary week's supply. This gigantic room is joined by **another** of similar capacity, for which a second ice-house has recently been constructed. Returning to the hanging-house, the visitor will observe that one portion is devoted to packing for the Australian Market, to which the Messrs. Matterson are **large** exporters. The killing house contains one of Denny's **patent singeing apparatus**. The pigs, herded in sties, next the killing-house, are stuck in the throat, caught up by the heels on to a turntable, thrust dead into the furnace, brought out singed, and ran off down iron scaffolding, all in about 30 seconds. They are then passed along the "bar" to scraping-tables, **weighing-house** and **scalding-tanks**, where the water, heated by steam, is at **one hundred Fahrenheit**. Near to the killing-house are the boilers, and adjacent the cupola-shaped steam **lard-house**, with numerous **melting-pans or coppers**, each holding a ton and a half of lard. This department is joined by the **pork-house**, in which are **twelve tanks**, each 6 feet by 5 feet, filled with pork; here also may be seen **hundreds of casks**, containing pork ready for the market, and lard for **biscuit bakers**.

In one of the smoking-houses we saw two thousand hams, undergoing this important process, the material used being sawdust and straw. The three **drying-houses** are noteworthy; they are 30 feet high, each containing 1,500 hams.

There are, in addition to the departments we have described, several others, including **bladder** and **branding-houses** but sufficient has been said to justify our opening remark, and we are glad to know that H.R.H. the Prince of Wales is among the customers of this the most enterprising of firms".

And that concludes Measom's account of Matterson's in 1866, which, I feel, could scarcely be bettered. What, one might well ask, was the purpose of the "bladder house"? It was simply the room in which bladders were dried before being filled by means of a pump with 14 pounds of lard. These were then sold to the various retail outlets. I like to think, though it cannot be proved, that some of these bladders may have been used for inflating footballs. In **The Boy's Prize Book**, published about this time, I came across this curious scrap of information: "... the old leather ball dilated with a good ox or pig bladder, is decidedly the best. The newly-invented vulcanised India-rubber balls are liable to get out of order — an accidental prick or cut rendering them quite useless".

Some details of the O'Mara factory have been given by Patricia Lavelle in her book about her father **James O'Mara, A Staunch Sinn Feiner**. In the late nineteenth century, the company opened up contacts in Russia and Rumania and also maintained a London office well into the twentieth century.

Patricia Lavelle has described how the Russian mission came about: "In 1891, great-grandfather had bought the rights of the Russian Bacon Company which was a concession or lease granted by the Russian Government in 1889 ... Great-grandfather actually leased, for twenty-one years, and worked the slaughter and curing houses situated near the Grianza Kozlova Station on the Vovonega Rostov railway in the Department of Lipetsk, Government of Tamboff, with the buildings and lands appertaining thereto".

To carry out the work of setting up the slaughter and curing houses O'Mara's brought a party of Limerick pork butchers and bricklayers to Russia in 1891. Two local pork butchers travelled to Turn-Severin in December 1902 to instruct the Rumanian butchers in the killing and curing of pigs.