

LIMERICK BACON

OLD LIMERICK

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For more than one hundred and thirty years, Limerick bacon has been famous. Indeed, the city has long been regarded, at home and abroad, as the home of bacon-curing. Thus the industry has given Limerick a unique reputation — a reputation, that should not be easily forfeited.

The establishment and development of bacon-curing in Limerick is well worthy of commemoration. It is a story that marks an important chapter in the industrial history of the city.

It was no mere accident of fate that Limerick became a bacon-curing centre. Surrounded by the fertile lands of the Golden Vale, the city served as a large market town in which all kinds of agricultural produce were bought and sold.

Pig-rearing was carried out in the city and county. Farmers killed and cured their own pigs at home, long before bacon factories were set up. In the city, the rearing of pigs was often a means of supplementing the meagre incomes of many working class families.

Bacon-curing grew from small beginnings to become the largest industry in the city. The curing process was refined and perfected and gave the local bacon its distinctive flavour. Matterson's, Shaws (later Clover Meats), O'Mara's and Denny's were the four big factories whose names became synonymous with Limerick and with bacon.

O'Mara's spread its operations and secured contacts in a number of European countries, including Russia. In 1891, a team of local porkbutchers and bricklayers travelled to Czarist Russia to build and set up bacon-curing facilities there. It is interesting to speculate on the industrial progress of Russia in the ninety five years since this project was undertaken and on the fact that Limerick was then exporting its technology to that country and even further afield.

With the establishment of large scale bacon factories in Limerick, other ancillary industries and trades flourished. Perhaps the best known of these occupations was that of the pigbuyer. These men earned a lucrative living by travelling to fairs and farmyards throughout the country buying pigs. The animals were brought back to Limerick and sold for slaughter to the local factories. With the establishment of the Pigs and Bacon Commission the pigbuyers' role became redundant and most of the buyers were forced to take up other occupations.

The bacon factories provided the ordinary people with a plentiful supply of cheap food, and the meat shops, especially in Parnell Street, Mungret Street, and John Street, were usually piled high with bacon and offals. Bacon and cabbage provided the favourite Sunday dinner, and the story is told of the poor woman who got the loan of a pig's head from her next door neighbour in order to give a bit of flavour to her boiling pot of cabbage.

The pig had many uses. The porkbutchers had a saying among themselves that once the animal entered the bacon factory "nothing was wasted except the squeal". Even the manure was highly prized by the Park people to nourish their tiny plots.

The coming of the free trade conditions of the 1960s saw the decline of bacon-curing in Limerick. The failure of the factories to modernise and to compete on the open market, led to the closure of Clover Meats and Matterson's. O'Mara's, had been the last remaining factory, when it ceased its killing and curing operations.

The end came quietly to the old industry. No longer is the sound of the pigs' wild shrieks heard in the streets of Limerick. No longer does the early morning siren sound across the city as it summoned the butchers to work. No longer do the wooden clogs beat a tattoo along the narrow laneways and 'short-cuts' as the butchers reported for their daily duty. And, sadly, no longer is Limerick bacon a household name throughout Ireland.

Though the factories have closed, pigmeat is still processed by a number of firms in the city. The bacon industry is undergoing major change, but there is still hope that the pioneering spirit that once made Limerick and its bacon famous throughout Ireland and Europe can be re-kindled. The city should not turn its back on its oldest industry.

