

Morning Market

IMAGINE a morning in 1857 with the sun shining on the bags of wheat, oats, barley and potatoes, that squat on the cobbled ground. And city and country men making deals in the shade and the whole market alive with a mixture of accents and the bewildering cries from cattle, sheep, pigs and lambs.

That would have been four years after King Henry III, in the first year of his reign, conceded to Edmund, Bishop of Limerick, a weekly market, every Tuesday, at his manor of Mungret. It later moved to Cornmarket Row.

Coming down High Street you know that the air is different and that another world awaits you. Pressurised sales technicians operate from their vans, parked on waste ground and the bargain announcements echo around the market like well rehearsed speeches. The vantage points on street corners are already claimed by growers of lettuce, sellers of fruit and vegetables and here and there a man with a whistle or guitar plays sweet music for small change.

Once passed the toll gate, the feel of cobbles, shiny and hard, reminds one of other times and people who once bought and sold in this place. There is again the perfume of fruit in the air as the cry of "six for thirty pence" catches the ear and the eye for a second. Turnips, carrots, flowers and potatoes still caked in dry earth, are laid at the feet of the men and women who grow and prune for a living. They stand silently, waiting for the right inquiry.

Under the low, long slated sheds, heavy coated men will bag a stone of kerr pinks and wish you good luck into the bargain. There is meat for sale, prime cuts of beef and sometimes home cured bacon. An old woman counts her change while another fondles cheap clothes. The experienced hands of a country woman will wrap a dozen eggs in a way that would cause insult if any of them broke. Chickens nestle in doorways, their frightened eyes, betraying suspicion as to why they are not in their coops. A voice is heard from a megaphone talking of good news and Jesus. The build-up for Christmas is on.

Above the constant, light hearted din of market sounds, necks of turkeys and chickens are snapped as a child looks for Santa in the crowd. A man stands on a bed of feathers, hired for a morning's work of snapping and plucking.

Today, the market is somewhat changed. Gone are the hides and skins and Feathery Bourke, who sold them, the pigs and cattle and barrels of wheat and the old traders who sold their wares with characteristic style and good humour. Yet, signs of the old ways still prevail, almost in defiance of the new and sophisticated methods of salesmanship.

Though change is inevitable, there are some traders left who remember fifty years of market mornings in Limerick. Nellie Collop, whose shop is at 1, Cornmarket Row, is a sprightly, elderly lady, who has lived beside the market all her life. She used to sell flour bags at the corner of Mungret Street, but is now in the business of selling the best of second hand clothes and shoes. "Back in the old days, you'd be better off rearing bonamb than a child. But I've no regrets."

It is half past twelve and the rain begins to fall. Stalls are hastily covered with sheets of plastic and the man selling the toffee apples is out of business.



