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Great days at The Paddocks

Leader archivist **Grainne Keays** has fond memories of her father's visits to the now gone Paddocks mart in the city. After discovering many wonderful pictures in our collection – see page 2 – she tells the intriguing story of those historic days

AMONG the hundreds of thousands of old negatives in the Limerick Leader archive collection, there is the story – told through many wonderful pictures – of The Paddocks. Here, on the South Circular Road, Limerick livestock was bought and sold down through the decades, through the good offices of William B Fitt & Co, auctioneers.

The Leader's vast collection includes pictures taken at the sales yard from the 1950s through to the 1990s. There is space for only a fraction of them with this feature, but we will bring more back to life in time, because they tell a unique Limerick story.

Although I never set foot in The Paddocks, I was very familiar with its affairs. My father and his uncle invariably brought, sold or studied form at its weekly sales. The annual bull sale was the highlight of their farming year.

Most of the sales were

occasional aberration. He ruefully remembers selling the very first heifer he ever owned at Fitt's for £11 less than her original purchase price. An inauspicious start to a career if ever there was one!

He also recalls one sale when

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a wild bullock came into the ring and ran amok. The crazed animal made a leap into the auctioneer's box but only partially completed his manoeuvre, landing see-saw style on his belly, with front legs in the box and hind legs in the ring.

The clerk who sat beside the auctioneer fainted before the drover had the presence of mind to pull the bullock back into the ring by the tail. Dad says he never saw that clerk ringside afterward.

career, but rather marked a retreat to the safety of a back office.

The sales yard was situated where Fitzhaven Square is today. It was probably chosen according to the first rule of auctioneering: location, location, location. In the early years it was ideally situated, being just outside the city's perimeter; the borough stone is located just across the street.

It was reasonably close to the railway station from where drovers could drive the cattle along Lord Edward Street, through Punch's Cross and into The Paddocks with very little difficulty. Over time, the Paddocks yard became swallowed up by the ever-expanding city and became increasingly inconvenient to access.

When I was growing up, the names Eddie Walsh, Freddie Ormston and Billy Gabbett were very familiar to me. Eddie joined Wm B. Fitt & Co. in 1916 while Freddie (father of Jack Ormston, of Ormston House) joined in 1914 when he was just 15. Sadly, Alec Gabbett, father of Billy, died tragically young in 1971.

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Fifty-nine years on, we can't say how much this bull sold for at The Paddocks in May 1955, but its owner was evidently proud of it. This classic picture was discovered recently in the Leader archive, alongside many others. See page 2 for more. We'll publish additional photographs in the coming weeks

Going, going, gone: a slice of local history

➔ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

These were all highly regarded men in our house, men of integrity and acumen and, luckily for historians, men who kept impeccable records. The records are now available to view at the Limerick Studies archive in Dooradoyle, under the custodianship of Tony Storan and his staff. They make for fascinating reading. As the archive's introduction rightly points out "the collection provides an insight into agricultural practice and land use in county Limerick" and "reflects economic and social trends relating to the transfer of wealth in Limerick and surrounding areas". What the introduction does not say is that the volumes will be an invaluable source for future generation of genealogists. If you want to know the buying or selling habits of your ancestors, how much they paid for a disputed bit of land or how much they achieved at a clearance sale, this is a good place to look.

The Fitt's bull sale was the largest in Ireland, always attracting between 600 and 700 animals

The auction books give a detailed account of who sold at The Paddocks every week and who bought. It was the list of buyers that particularly interested me. The names of old Limerick business families abound. The names Webb of Sarsfield Street, Glynn of Rutland Street, Hall of William Street, Nicholas of Annacotty, Leonard of William Street, Humphreys of Cappamore and O'Connor of Wickham Street appear, as do almost all the other butchers who traded in Limerick and its hinterland.

Have a look at our photographs and you might spot some of them. Other buyers came to the Paddocks from hospitals and schools, such as Mungret College. Perhaps the most interesting buyer of all was



This wonderful picture from the Leader's archive shows potential buyers at The Paddocks, South Circular Road, around 1963. Some in the crowd are busily studying the credentials of the livestock being led around the ring, while others look singularly unimpressed by the animal under the hammer. Two gentlemen at the centre of the picture have given up on proceedings altogether and nodded off. Nice to see quite a few ladies keeping an eye on proceedings too!



contributing factor to the closure of the yard in the 1990s.

For such a prominent businessman, surprisingly little information is readily available about William Birkett Fitt. He was born in Limerick in 1860, the son of Thomas Fitt and Anna Birkett. The Fitts were members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). William married Agnes Ann Styles in 1896 and they lived at 46, George's Street (now O'Connell Street), Limerick, from where he ran his auctioneering business. The Fitts' elder son, William junior, died at the age of 22 months. Notice of his death appears in



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Busy scenes at Ring 2 (the bullock ring) at Fitt's Paddocks. Eddie Walsh and his clerk, Albert, can be seen in the auctioneer's box

today. His mother was Kathleen Gabbett and his recollections were invaluable to me in writing this article.

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I have yet to discover how and when William became involved in the auctioneering trade (conjecture suggests it was a family trade) but Wm B. Fitt & Co. was well established by the time he married. For many years the business thrived.

However, it appears that around 1932 William took the unfortunate decision to act as personal guarantor for an individual who subsequently absconded, leaving him with an enormous debt. He was forced to sell his share in the company around 1934, which was purchased by the Gabbett family who were already his partners in the business.

He retired to Kilrush in Co. Clare where he died in his 85th year in 1945. He is buried beside his son at the Quaker Graveyard at Punch's Cross. Agnes Fitt died in 1947.

The Fitt's bull sale was the largest in Ireland, always attracting between 600 and 700 animals. Walter O'Brien's copy of the 1936 catalogue shows that out of 600 bulls for sale, 570 were shorthorns. The shorthorn was a dual purpose animal and was thus extremely popular until the continental beef animal and the Holstein milkers began to dominate the market. Agriculture has changed indeed!



It's a prize winner: A group stand in for photo at the bull show in May 1957. This gent's trench coat is only the best!



A bloodstock sale in 1968. We believe that the man holding the cup is Joe Clarke of Irish Cement. Irish Cement had its own herd in Cooper Hill at the time



Shampoo and set: Billy Keays, Denis Cahill and James Keays preparing a Hereford bull for sale in 1970



Standing tall: One gentleman vies for a better view at the sheep sale at the WB Fitt & Co premises in December 1969



Dressed to impress: there was no shortage of style during this sale at The Paddocks around 1963

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When Fennessy's was a home from home for Paddocks regulars

GRAINNE KEAYS

FENNESSY'S pub on the South Circular Road is across the road from where The Paddocks once stood. There I had a delightful conversation with Michael Collins, the "retired but still active" owner of Fennessy's, and his son, Dara, who runs the pub today. When I asked Michael if he remembered the farmers coming in from The Paddocks, he smiled and said: "Sure, I just got the last of the cow dung out of the tiles last week!"

Fennessy's used to have a bar exemption in order to open early from 9am to 10.30am to serve the farmers who came to The Paddocks. Michael remembers that they served sandwiches and Bovril. It was perfectly legal to sell alcohol under the exemption but most farmers didn't indulge that early in the day, although the occasional Bovril was fortified.

Fennessy's also provided ash plants as an informal service.



This plaque on the wall near Ashbourne Villas, South Circular Road, is the last remaining evidence that Wm. B. Fitt & Co. existed in this location. This is the spot where the company used to post notices of upcoming sales

Many farmers would come in and leave their plants behind. Michael would gather them up and any farmer in need of an ash plant could call to Fennessy's and be sure of getting the required implement. Like its first cousin, the hurley, the ash

plant had a good spring in it if a beast needed encouragement to move along.

Dara remembers getting the odd poke of an ash plant too and being told, "Young fella, get me a pint there."

Michael has never ceased to be

fascinated by the innate instinct of the farmer to haggle. He swears he even heard a farmer arguing with the operator over the price of putting through a phone call: "You'll do it for four pence, won't you". It wasn't intended to be a question.

The year 1970 was the bad year for calves. You simply couldn't give them away. Michael Collins remembers a farmer exchanging a calf for a chicken (he didn't specify if the chicken was oven-ready or still scratching). A neighbour of my own recalls stopping for "refreshment" at the Horse and Hound bar on the way home from Fitt's, leaving the same three calves he had taken to the mart that morning in the horsebox outside only to find when he emerged refreshed that someone had put two more calves into the box.

There were two weekly sales at The Paddocks: calves on Tuesday and cattle on Wednesday. They also sold sheep

and pigs. The main bull sale took place in April/May and there was a major fat stock sale before Christmas. Michael estimates that, at one point, custom from The Paddocks accounted for approximately 25% of Fennessy's trade.

Presumably other businesses in the area also benefited hugely. Such was the impact. The Paddocks had on Fennessy's that they still keep photographs from the mart on their walls, complete with rosettes.

Moving on from Fennessy's, I also spoke with Mary Riordan, a retired school teacher, who has lived most of her life at Ashbourne Villas, also across the road from the sales yard. For Mary, as a young girl growing

up in the late Fifties and the Sixties, market day was "when the country came to town". It was a great curiosity for town children to see the comings and goings. She has nothing but good memories of The Paddocks; she doesn't even remember there being any bad smells. She was never allowed inside the yard although other, braver, children sneaked in to have a look around and savour the atmosphere.

Mary remembers the lowing of the cattle and particularly the bellowing of the bulls. When the market eventually closed she missed the sounds and the activity very much. It was Mary who pointed out to me a small piece of wall at the end

of Ashbourne Villas where a plaque with the name Wm B. Fitt still remains - the last evidence that the Paddocks existed in this area. It was on this wall that the company used to post its advertisements for upcoming sales.

From all the historical facts and the anecdotes I have picked up in the last few weeks, it seems to me that Wm B. Fitt & Co was a business that was run with great integrity and efficiency, and the men who ran it provided a forum for trade and for social interaction.

However, it was the men and women who attended who gave the place its atmosphere and appeal.

These are the people that we see in the photographs. The people I spoke to remembered only banter, excitement and the great characters and a place where the highs and lows of farming were played out on an open stage.

"Sure, I just got the last of the cow dung out of the tiles last week!"

Michael Collins
Publican, Fennessy's,
South Circular Road