

# Bedford Row over the Years

**B**edford Row named after John Russell the 4th Duke of Bedford (1710-1771) and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland (1757-1761) has been one of the primary commercial thoroughfares in Limerick since the expansion of the city into Newtown Pery in the late 1700's. The recent pedestrianisation of Bedford Row brings fresh vibrancy to a street that has provided the citizens of Limerick with entertainment centres, hostelrys, houses of worship, a maternity hospital and merchants of all descriptions. Among the more prominent businesses of the 19th century one finds J & T Norton, who traded in a large commercial premises, recorded in Bassett's directory of 1875 as manufacturers and merchants, auctioneers, valuers and undertakers. *The Irish Catholic Chronicle and People's News* of Sunday 28 September 1867 records the following,

Limerick, Wednesday. – A large case of first-class firearms, consisting of all kinds of revolvers, from double to six barrel, chambers, with pistols and several single and double-barrelled guns, was discovered last evening, having been brought from the railway to the concerns of Messrs. J&T Norton, general commission merchants, Bedford Row, in this city, through mistake of the address, which was "M Morton and Sons Gunmakers, Limerick" There being no such persons in the trade or known here, Mr Norton thought it might have been an error of misdirection, and accordingly had the case opened and examined, when the contents were found to be as above described. The case and its contents was forwarded to the constabulary barracks, where it is now in safe keeping of the authorities.

Cannock and Co eventually bought out J & T Norton's business and Stewart & Co;

by *T O'Farrell and R Hodkinson*

High Class Biscuit Manufacturer later occupied the premises. In a series of articles entitled *Advance the Prosperity of Ireland* writing in 1907 a *Sunday Independent* journalist describes the factory as follows:

The biscuit factory is yet another evidence that Limerick is not hopelessly decayed, for it is the only biscuit factory in the South of Ireland, in fact, the only one south of Dublin, and it is much appreciated by the towns in the West and South West as well as in that large district to the East of the City of Limerick. Mr Buchanan very kindly showed me over the whole factory, where I noticed the making of biscuits with much interest and instruction, and found that in the matter of modern machinery and methods Messrs Stewart's was quite equal to some of the much larger world-famed biscuit factories I have been over. Moreover, having personally tried the biscuits they turn out, I found them quite equal to any others, and I made a point of giving some to English friends, who were loud in their praise of them. Yet if I am not much mistaken, Limerick City and county support foreign importations in preference to their own local manufactures! Again, the bread turned out by this firm was not even second to the excellent Cork bread, but quite as good, which, I must admit was a surprise, for it equals the best to be had even in some few Continental towns.

It is very interesting to watch the making of a little biscuit, and how little we know the work it entails before it appears upon the table. First of all, the ingredients go into a large mixer, then on to the brakes, then through large

rollers which bring it out the required thickness, when it proceeds to the stamping machine, most ingenious and intricate inventions, from which the substance comes out stamped and cut to the shapes required, the biscuits dropping automatically on to the pans underneath, while the trimmings return by an upper band for future mixings. The pans then pass through huge "travelling ovens" and when their contents cool down and dry they are ready for packing. These ovens of which I noticed several are not the ordinary ones but are heated top and bottom so as to penetrate the biscuit thoroughly and rapidly. For making "Fig Rolls" and other biscuits I saw a very intricate piece of mechanism, Mitchell's Rout Press with attachment, which is marvellous in its manipulation of the jams closing it into the dough automatically. Another very interesting department is that in, which the returned biscuit tins, are completely renovated and turned out like new. I saw battered rusty old tins returned to the firm by their customers going through the process of cleaning and retinning. They first are plunged into a chemical bath, which thoroughly cleanses them, removing all rust or other dirt; then they are dipped into a second chemical bath, and finally into a retinning vat, whence they emerge as new, all dints and dentures having previously been seen to. The machinery in the establishment is worked by a powerful engine, 60h.p. and a huge Lancashire boiler. Beside the biscuit factory is the large bakehouse, containing half a dozen huge ovens. The second floor contains the raw materials and from apertures in the floor the raw materials pass down through wooden gulleys to the mixer below, with which I have already dealt. On another floor some forty girls are continuously employed wrapping the various kinds into penny packets, which are very popular in the country districts. The lofts contain all the requisites of the factory, such as icing machines and large drums of the best dry sugar. Stewart's biscuit factory is a credit to Limerick and it is a very great pity it does not meet with the thorough support it should at the hands of the citizens.

Many readers will recall Stokes & McKiernan's business premises, which provided the people of Limerick and the surrounding counties with everything from a 'needle to an anchor'. E G Stokes and A Mc Kiernan founded the firm in 1911, when

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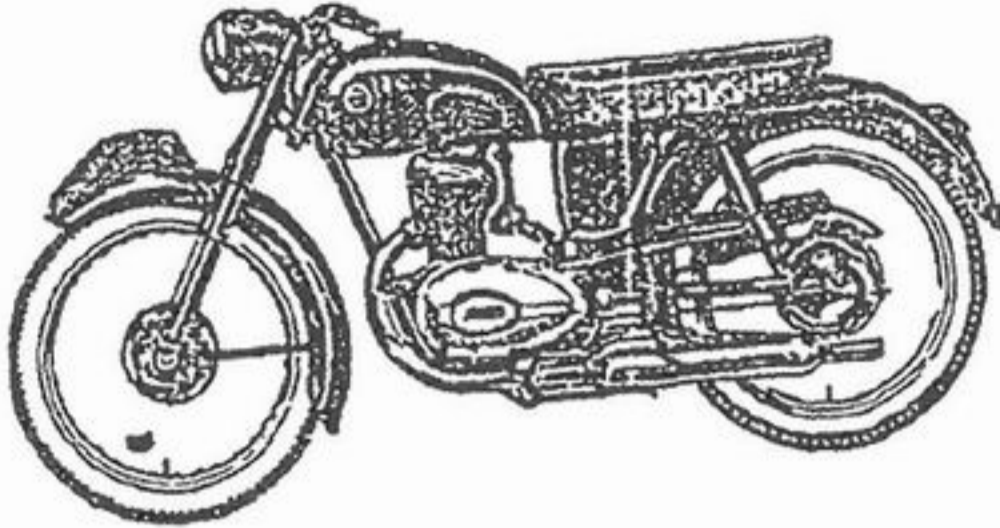
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**K. WHELAN, Proprietress.**

National Hotel advertisement 1905

## JAMES

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**BEDFORD ROW, LIMERICK**



See the **FAMOUS JAMES MOTOR CYCLES** on  
our Stand at the **LIMERICK HORSE SHOW.**

Stokes & McKiernan advertisement 1954

they set up business at 11 Bedford Row. Both gentlemen had previously worked for the British Co-Operative and Wholesale Society. Initially they provided creameries with belting and glassware and apart from supplying the creameries they also bought produce such as butter, eggs and cream, which they sold to the general public. Mr McKiernan was the firm's accountant and Mr Stokes promoted the business country-wide initially cycling around the neighbouring counties on his bicycle. In 1911 Mr Stokes drew a wage of £2 per week. In 1914 Mr William Wallace, brother-in law to Mr Stokes joined the firm, but unfortunately he was killed in a motorcycle accident in 1916. In 1922 the firm expanded into 12

Bedford Row and in that year the business commenced the sale of motorcycles and motorcar spare parts. In the early 1930s the firm expanded further into the sale of batteries and radios. During the war years and petrol shortages the firm showed its ingenuity through the use of a van powered by gas produced from coke, the driver being a Mr Harry Sinden and the stoker a Mr Louis Fay. Mr McKiernan retired in 1945 and a new company was formed, the directors being Mr E G Stokes, Mrs M A Stokes, Mr W W Stokes, Mrs G M Stokes and Mr T H Williams. In 1961 Stokes and McKiernan celebrated 50 years in business and the range of items they were supplying had increased considerably from their init-

ial tentative steps taken when the company ventured into business in 1911. Coinciding with the 50th anniversary celebrations the business moved to Sarsfield Street, occupying the former Spillane's Tobacco factory and in 1972 relocated to Ballysimon, finally closing in 1978.

On Thursday 19 December 1935, Limerick people welcomed the opening of the magnificent Savoy Theatre, Cinema, Restaurant and Tea Lounge. The *Limerick Leader* recorded much fanfare and excitement on opening night and Mr Justice M Flood, on granting an entertainment licence, said he had "very great pleasure in granting the licence." He had been "through the building and found it to be a most admirable place." In his opinion "it was a distinct acquisition to Limerick. There has been a considerable amount of money spent on it and on the whole of Limerick had reason to congratulate itself on having such an admirable building."

The magnificent organ, décor of the theatre and luxury of the restaurants bore testament to the opinions of Justice Flood. Much has been written on the Savoy over the years and the many international and local artistes who entertained the people of Limerick. However, it could not have happened without dedicated staff, far too many to record in a short article. There were many efficient managers such as Jimmy Shiel, Jack Cruise, Jack Nordell, Cliff Marsden, Tom English, Maurice Johnston and John Likely. The last manager of the old Savoy was the late Brendan Murray RIP who was ably assisted by his brother Kieran. The fact that Brendan kept the 'show on the road' throughout the recession of the 1980s reflects his impresario skills and his untimely death in 1988 brought down the final curtain on a much loved centre of entertainment. Limerick Cinema enthusiasts were also entertained in the Grand Central cinema, also on Bedford Row. Some of these cinema goers may well have travelled home in a car purchased from the Bedford Motor Company which, in 1931, was advertising 'The New Vauxhall Light Six, a 12 H.P 6 Cylinder priced £238' or a motorcycle from Stokes and McKiernan where, in 1954, one could buy 'a James Cadet J.5 at a sale price of £95'.

The people who enjoyed the entertainment in the Savoy may well have heard the sound of laughter and celebration for the first time in the premises immediately next door.

The Bedford Maternity Hospital or the Lying In Hospital as it was more widely known as, catered for the mothers to be and newborn babies of Limerick and surrounding counties. The hospital traces its origins to Parnell Street in 1812 and opened its doors on Bedford Row in 1866. Ballingarry native Eileen Hourigan MBE who served with the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service Reserves returned to work in the Bedford Row hospital after World War 2. She survived the sinking of HMHS Amsterdam off the Normandy Coast on August 7th 1944. Eileen stayed on board throughout the evacuation helping the patients to safety

## "BACK-TO-SCHOOL" SALE

Big Reductions in Men's Wear Also

**F. GLASGOW**  
**BEDFORD ROW (Next Savoy)**

LADARTAR SAEDILS ANNSO.

Glasgow advertisement 1948



Savoy staff, front row L to R: Tommy O'Farrell, Lillie Reardon, May Kiely, Sissy Davis, Molly Barrington, Agnes O'Halloran, Mavis Kenny, Nancy O'Farrell, Celine Horrigan, Mary Good.  
 Second row L to R: Ms Browne, Angela Casey, May Browne, Mrs Doherty, Diana Browne, Ms Brinn, Ms Stanley, \_ \_ .  
 Back row L to R: Jack O'Shea, \_ \_ , Alec O'Farrell, \_ \_ , \_ \_ , Michael Ryan, Dom Shanahan, Benny Franklin, Jimmy Carter, \_ \_ .

only making good her own escape by sliding down the starboard side of the ship after it had capsized. Her bravery was recognised with the award of an MBE

(Military Division) in the New Years honours list (December 1944). The Bedford Row Hospital closed in 1975.

The firm of Francis Spaight and Sons Ltd traded at the lower end of Bedford Row and Henry St as "Timber and Hardware merchants. Saw Mills. Cooperage & Box Factor" for well over a century. Mention of the name Spaight inevitably gives rise to reference to the loss of the ship the *Francis Spaight* and the dreadful decision taken by the crew of drawing lots to determine who should be killed and eaten in order to sustain the survivors. This sad fate befell a cabin boy named O'Brien. The remaining crew were eventually brought to safety.

Sir Peter Tait (1828 - 1890) ranks as one of the most successful entrepreneurial figures of 19th century Limerick. In 1850 Tait rented rooms in 4 Bedford Row and procured a (new to the market) Singer Sewing Machine and employed a woman to make shirts. Within three years the business had prospered and he placed an advertisement in the *Limerick Chronicle* of 29 Jan 1853, which stated 'Notice to Shirt Makers - Permanent Employment for 500 Shirt Makers - Apply to Mr Tait, 4 Bedford Row'.

Houses of Worship were also a feature of old Bedford Row. The 'Independent Meeting House' chapel was where Sir Peter Tait married Rose Abraham of Fort Prospect, on 23 June 1853. It was also the venue in November 1845 for a series of anti-slavery lectures given by Frederick Douglas (1817- 1895), himself an escaped

slave. Douglas was befriended by Daniel O'Connell and is an inspiration and champion of US President Barak Obama. The premises was sold in 1881 and served as commercial premises thereafter occupied by the 'St Columcille Cabinet and Joinery Factory', later again P Hodnett and Co Ltd Builders Providers and finally James McMahon Ltd. The Primitive Methodist Chapel opened in December 1821. It eventually became the Grand Central Cinema. The façade remains to this day as part of a commercial building. The Franciscan Church built between 1876-86 but not finished until 1931 was designed by Limerick architect William Edward Corbett. The architects Jones and Kelly completed Corbett's unfinished church between 1928-31 and the contractor was Michael Gough of Wolfe Tone St, Limerick. The basilica church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome inspired the internal décor. The firm of James Hodgkinson & Sons, Henry Street Limerick carried out the decoration and the church was consecrated in December 1931.

**NOTES**

Randel Hodgkinson and Tom O'Farrell are committee members of the Thomond Archaeological and Historical Society. As part of the society's summer outing series 2011 they guided a tour of Bedford Row. The material reproduced in this article is from research carried out for the tour. Further information on the society is available at [www.thomsoc.com](http://www.thomsoc.com)

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Chassis and Cab ...	£229	2-TON. Chassis ...	£228
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Lorry ...	£248	D/V ...	£278
Van ...	£278	Lorry ...	£278

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 BEDFORD ROW, LIMERICK.

Bedford Motor Company advertisement 1934