

The Park Danes

PART THREE

LAND AND LABOUR



he Park farms were tiny, no more than large gardens not exceeding one or two acres, and for these small holdings a yearly rack-rent was paid.

The people were renowned through the centuries for their skill as market gardeners. By hard work and an ingenious system of crop rotation, they made the land produce an abundance of potatoes, turnips, cabbage, parsnips and carrots. The neatly tilled and weed-free plots, with their various hues of green and white, earned for Park the name, the "Garden of Limerick". The plots kept the city supplied with vegetables all the year round.

In the nineteenth century Park's biggest landlord was John Joseph Henry, who owned 519 of the 523 acres in Singland. He had more than 150 tenants on this estate, and 119 of the 150 Singland houses also belonged to him. On November 10th, 1841, William Hickie Junior, of Jane Mount, Co. Cork, completed a survey of Henry's lands in Co. Tipperary and Limerick. In the report presented with his Singland survey he wrote:

I have most minutely examined this estate, the soil of which is the very richest quality, and from the proximity to the city of Limerick is, and must at all times be, very valuable.

Had an effort been made some thirty years ago, to induce persons to take

by Patsy Harrold

building sites along the Dublin and Tipperary roads the value of the property might have been greatly enhanced.

In my survey I have set down the almost certain return that may be expected on a proper management of the estate, 400 English acres of which are let to one tenant, who derives a considerable profit by sub-letting it.

I must now remark that the subletting system has been most ruinous to Ireland. I would therefore suggest to Mr. Henry that each and every tenant on this estate should hold directly under himself.

I have valued the several lots in Singland as vegetable gardens and town fields and not as building ground, this I have done, as Limerick is at present overbuilt, and the inhabitants preferring the other side of the Shannon (over which a magnificent bridge has been erected), have built a number of beautiful villas, within the last five years, and ornamented the Clare side of the river with handsome plantations, gardens and drives, at great expense. Under these circumstances I do not anticipate the possibility of inducing persons of property to build on Singland.

There are however some improvements which might be made with

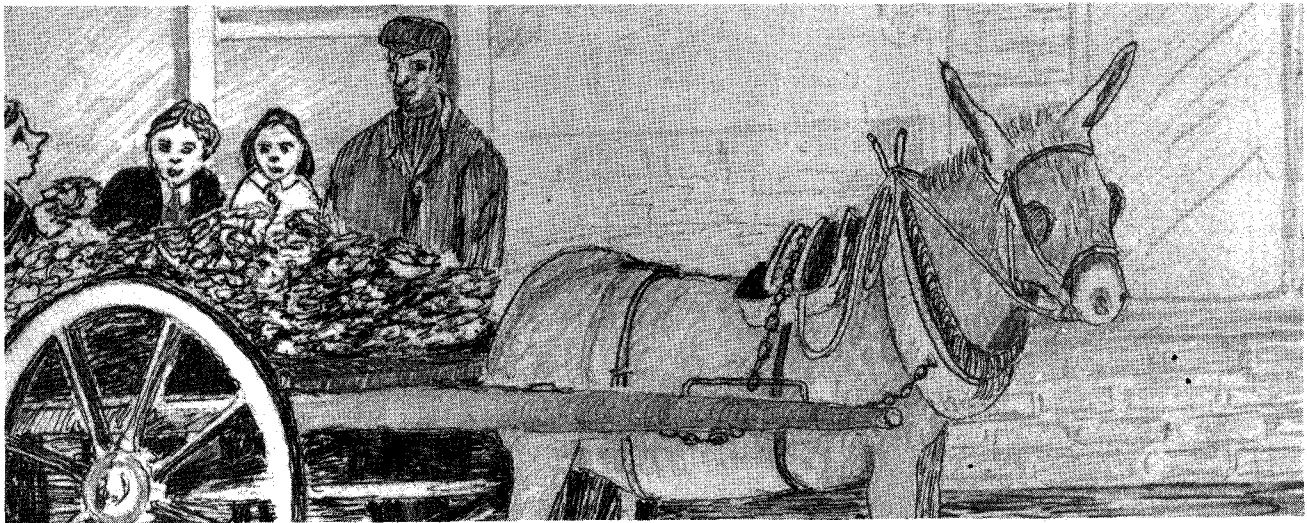
great advantage to the estate.

The Dublin road, which passes this portion of the property, is on both sides most densely inhabited by a very poor description of tenantry who pay rent to Mr. Patrick Coughlan, their habitations are most wretched, it would be very desirable to reduce the number of inhabitants in this quarter, and those who are found to possess sufficient means to be continued as tenants, might be removed to the centre of the estate; this effected in the course of time persons possessing small yearly incomes and obliged by business or otherwise to reside in the vicinity of Limerick, might be induced to take lots, varying from two to five English acres, and erect neat cottages on them. The same observations may be made on the several lots on each side of the Tipperary road, which fortunately is not thickly inhabited.

On examining the survey it will be found that I valued the entire property as if there existed no outstanding leases, those five that are yet unexpired are not likely to be of long duration ...

**Wm. Hickie Junr.
Jane Mount,
Cork,
10th Nov. 1841.**

Griffith's Valuation of 1850 showed few changes in the picture of Singland presented by William Hickie. The letting and sub-letting of the tiny plots - some of them only 3 or 4 perches - provided



A drawing by Kevin Hannan of a Parkman selling his cabbage in Broad Street.

scarcely more than a subsistence level of existence. And the pattern of land division was little different in Rhebogoe and Lower Park.

Of the 334 acres in Rhebogoe, 147 were owned by the clergyman Rev. Thomas Otwell Moore. John Watson Mahony had 74 of the 78 acres-of Rhebogoe Island. The landlord of another part of the area, Rhebogoe Meadows, which included a bleach mill, two houses and 29 acres, was Thomas Cochrane. A section of the canal and towing-path made up 10 acres.

Most of the 70 tenants were packed into the 147 acres owned by Parson Moore (as he was known in Park). He was also the landlord of 48 of the 60 houses in Rhebogoe.

A story is still told about this old-world figure, who dressed in spats, frock-coat and a quaint hat. One day when passing the Gallagher household in Rhebogoe, he got the pleasant smell of a frying herring. Stepping inside, he admonished the startled housewife for her extravagance: "Eat stirabout and pay me my rent".

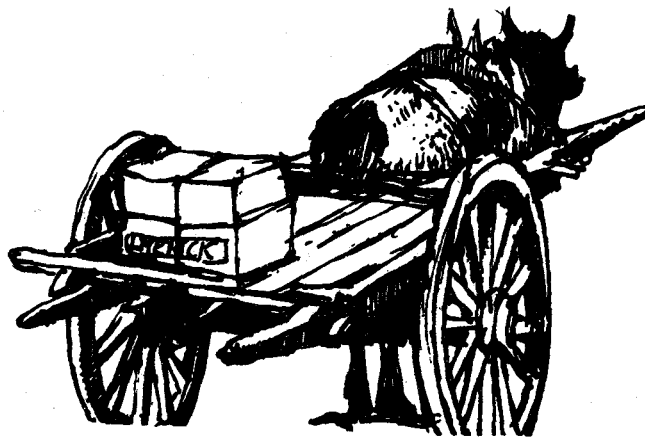
In the area that later became known as Lower Park the concentration of people and houses was even greater. The 100 tenants, who lived in the same number of houses, were clustered into 239 acres. Robert H. and Thomas Maunsell were the biggest landlords, having 62 acres. Daniel and Edward Harold owned 50 acres, and Frances C. Gabbett had 19 acres. The canal and banks accounted for 9 acres.

Many of the old Park names are to be found in Griffith's Valuation and in the Singland survey carried out by William Hickie. But not all of the 320 or so tenant families survived to the end of the century. Emigration, the land acts and sheer congestion forced many of them off their little holdings.

But small though they were, the gardens provided the Park people with the only means they had of earning a living. And they made the most of their severely restricted opportunities.

Limerick served as a big market town for the surrounding countryside and provided markets of all kinds. The Irishtown was at the heart of the trade between the city and the country. The Butter, Hay and Pig (later Calf) markets were located in nearby Cathedral Place. The Potato Market was held in Merchants' Quay, across the Abbey river. The Park people regularly attended all these markets, mainly for the sale of their produce. The market-place at Cornmarket Row was the city's main shopping centre. Originally the Milk Market was situated there near White Wine Lane, off Mungret Street. Later this market became known as the Fowl Market.

The poet, John Francis O'Donnell, was born and reared near the market place, and in **Limerick Town** has



Destination Limerick, from a drawing by Thomas Ryan.

given a vivid picture of the bustling, noisy scene of his childhood memories, as it was at the middle of the nineteenth century.

Here I've got you, Philip Desmond, standing in the market-place, 'Mid the farmers and the corn sacks, and the hay in either space, Near the fruit stalls, and the women knitting socks and selling lace.

There is High Street up the hillside, twenty shops on either side, Queer, old-fashioned dusky High Street, here so narrow, there so wide, Whips and harness, saddles, sign boards, hanging out in quiet pride.

Up and down the noisy highway, how the market people go! Country girls in Turkey kerchiefs - poppies moving to and fro - Frieze-clad fathers, great in buttons, brass and watch-seals all a show.

A hundred years later High Street had changed little. The harness-makers, saddlers, and leather shops still hung out their equine products in "quiet pride" along the "noisy highway". And the old, cobbled market-place still attracted crowds of farmers and shoppers on Saturdays and Wednesdays, the traditional market times. Saturday, of course, was the gala day of the week when, from early morning to late afternoon, the whole area became a teeming mass of people, animals, fowl and vegetables.

The Park people were a natural part of these surroundings. Mungret Street, the thoroughfare running off the market-place, was the gateway to the commercial life of the city for Limerick working class men and women. At the end of the street, where it adjoins Broad Street, the Cabbage Market was held. The vegetables were brought the short distance from Park to the Irishtown by means of donkey and cart. This work was usually done by women, who, with their carts, lined the kerb at

the western side of Broad Street waiting for their customers to arrive.

Cabbage formed a wholesome part of the poor man's dinner, which was often "greased" by the rancid offals, bought by hard-won pennies in Mungret Street. The vegetable was said to be never any good unless flavoured by a lump of bacon, or a "jowl" of pig's head. A humorous old story, often told in Limerick, relates how a woman, boiling some cabbage, sent out to her next-door neighbour for a loan of a pig's head in order to give the cooking cabbage "a bit of flavour"! The poorest people had to be content with a head of cabbage boiled with the less attractive "backbone" or pig's tail.

On the evenings of market days, when the carts had been driven home, the roadway resembled a tobacco barn after a cyclone, with thousands of the coarse, outer leaves of the cabbages strewn about the street. These leaves were only discarded at the time of sale, for they helped to inflate the size of the purchase and also had the practical advantage of protecting the more tender and succulent "heart" underneath.

A reserved community who kept socially apart from the fellow-citizens, the Park people were nevertheless highly regarded for their honesty and straight dealing by the women who bought their produce. Maurice Lenihan, in his **History of Limerick**, published in 1866, noted:

Park is a townland within the municipal boundary of Limerick ... The inhabitants of Park are amongst the most thrifty and industrious in any part of Ireland. They pay from £8 to £10 an acre for their patches of land, the largest holders not renting more than from three to four acres. They cultivate vegetables with which they supply the citizens; they rear cattle and pigs, and grow potatoes and turnips to feed their cattle and pigs, and for their own use also. They manure the land very highly and being within

the Borough they are subject to high rates and taxes. There has been much emigration from Park in recent years, of young men and women especially. The names generally of the residents are Cunneen, or O'Conneen, one of the ancient names in the South of Ireland ... Hannan or Hanneen, Quilligan, Clancy and McNamara, or by abbreviation, Mac, of which there is a great number in Park.

Milk was carried into Limerick by the wives and daughters of the market-gardeners in buckets, which they balanced dexterously on turban-like cloths on their heads. The buckets were brought home in the same manner, this time filled with parcels of groceries bought from the milk-money. The women also took the milk into the city on donkeys and carts and sold it to their customers, usually from door to door. Old Park women recall the milk being sold for one shilling for five quarts.

At the end of the summer a few milch cows would be bought by each family at fairs throughout Munster. The sale of the extra milk helped to keep the Park people going through the winter. The cows were sold in May of the following year. A family would also buy about a dozen bonhams and these would be fattened and sold after three months.

But more animals also meant that extra land and feeding had to be found. An annual auction was held by the agents Wickham and Brown for the yearly rental of grazing land at the water meadows near the Groddy river. The names given to many of these "divides" were varied and picturesque: "1st and 2nd Pike", "the Six Acre", "the Handkerchief", "the Bog", "1st, 2nd and 3rd Canal", "the Star", "the Flag", "the Bleach Field", "the Long Acre" and "the Square Acre". The land in Park itself was too valuable to be "wasted" on grazing, so the rental of the water meadows was a vital necessity in the year's farming.

In December 1881 the prices being paid at Limerick markets provide a guide to the income of the Park people: Best beef, 9d to 12d per lb; mutton, 10d per lb.; duck eggs, 15d per dozen; hen eggs, 14d per dozen; sizeable bacon pigs, 13 to 14 stone, 49/- to 50/- per cwt. (Fat pigs of any weight were unsaleable); potatoes, wholesale, 3½d to 4d per stone; retail, 5d per stone; turnips, 14/- to 16/- per ton.

A report published in the **Limerick Chronicle**, on April 1st 1882, gave details of an appeal by eight Park tenants to the County Crown Court at Limerick, before Justice O'Hagan and Commissioner Vernon, against the decision of the Sub-Commissioners in fixing a "fair" rent. According to the evidence given, the holdings each averaged about two Irish acres. The old rent paid was £8-2-6 per Irish acre,

and the judicial rent fixed by the Sub-Commissioners represented an average of about £6 per acre. The tenants maintained that £3 an acre would be a fair rent.

The tenants were represented by Andrew Harte, who was generally examined on their behalf. He stated that each tenant could realise £50 per acre yearly from the land. The outlay he estimated as follows: Wages of a man for a year, £26; disposing of the produce, £5; seed, £1, manure, £8; letting value of the land £4; taxes, £2. The total expenditure, therefore, came to £46, leaving £4 for a man to feed, clothe and educate his family.

After hearing the legal arguments, Justice O'Hagan said he and his fellow-Commissioners were clearly of the opinion that the holdings were not townparks. However, he asked that in the event of the lands being not classified as agricultural holdings, what should they be designated? He went on to state that if the lands were used to grow potatoes, turnips and cabbages, should they on that account be deprived of their character of agricultural holdings, and should they not be treated in the same way that the court would treat lands used for similar purposes at a greater distance from the city? After this sympathetic summing-up, Justice O'Hagan gave his decision that the gardens were agricultural holdings and found in favour of the tenants' appeal.

After this decision, the Parkmen went back to their hard, back-breaking work with renewed vigour. An engine-driver recalled that, while driving the Sligo train from Limerick, he saw one of the market-gardeners ploughing his land at 2.30 a.m. The long hours of labour also caught the passing eye of another outside observer. The Church of Ireland clergyman, Ross-Lewin, frequently travelled through Park on his journey from his parish church in Kilmurry to Limerick city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Two verses of his poem, **The**

Men of Park, describe the dawn-to-dusk working day of the "toiling, moiling" gardeners:

I've passed them by in the early day,
When the city folk in their slumbers lay,
When the dew shone white on the grassy lawn,
And the cocks 'gan crow at the rising dawn,
And the blithe notes rang from the soaring lark,
And there at their work were the men of Park.

And when at even vesper bell
Is tolling, tolling o'er brake and dell,
And the birds are speeding their homeward flight
Seeking for cover ere gath'ring night,
Out in the gardens you still may mark
The toiling, moiling men of Park.

But not everyone understood the Park people and their working methods. Some Limerick folk believed that the "Danes" had plenty of money and were grasping for more. And the gardeners were often unfairly maligned for allegedly working round the clock.

The story is told of two well-known city anglers who were digging for worms on a Sunday morning in a Park garden, alongside the Dublin Road. The men were greatly amused to hear a passing woman, on her way home from early Mass, say to her companion: "There they are again. They never stop ... they're always at it. They never rest, not even on Sundays!"

But anyone who knew even a little about the rigorous reality of the Park people's daily lives thought otherwise. Economic survival was the only reason for the long working hours; this basic motivation was instinctively understood by the market-gardeners from their earliest days. Pressure on the land was so intense that they could not afford to grow the curly cauliflower; the plant took too long to grow and also needed too much space. But despite the desperate need for more land, the people invariably preserved the highest standards of honour and dignity in their dealings with each other. Fences were never erected and each gardener kept strictly within his own bound stones.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the economic conditions improved for the Parkmen and many of them were able to supplement their meagre incomes by securing casual employment with their horses and carts in the bacon factories, the railway and the docks. The men played a big part in the formation of the Limerick Hired Carmen's Association and many served as officers of that body. "Blotto" Cusack was the carmen's chairman during the turbulent times after the setting-up of the Irish state. As well as drawing cargo from the docks, the carmen also found work with the Corporation and local building contractors.



Drawing by Kevin Hannan.