

The Park Danes

MANURE



by Kevin Hannan

PART FOUR



ark was notorious for its all-pervading smell of manure. A large dunghill was located close to every house and these ubiquitous heaps made the atmosphere 'alive' with a pungent, teeming odour. The manure was essential: the little plots could never have continued to produce crop after

crop, year in and year out, without the revitalising effects of the lavish application of well-rotted dung. The manure was widely available from many sources, including the hundreds of shopkeepers' stables in the city. Supplies from the funeral undertakers' yards were especially highly prized. The stables were cleaned out daily to ensure that the black and greys were kept spic and span for their melancholy duties. The straw, being only slightly soiled, was used again by the provident Parkmen as bedding for their own less squeamish animals.

The nearby Carr's Livery Stables in Athlunkard Street provided a regular and plentiful supply of manure. Besides the daily business of the stables, animals found wandering in the streets at night were rounded up and brought there by members of the Night Watch.

The system of 'dyking' manure prevailed well into the present century. This was the Parkmen's practice of going with donkey-carts into the sidestreets, lanes and back alleys of Limerick and collecting the sweepings of the many pigsties. In the days before flush toilets came into general use, human waste matter was also collected on the same route. The dyking was carried out at dawn and this exercise marked the beginning of another long day's toil for the market-gardeners.

Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond, in his second **Shawn-a-Scoob** pamphlet, published in 1868, has left a vivid description of the parts of Limerick where the Parkmen made the early morning forays:

"See the back slums and dingy lanes,
Enough to suffocate the Danes;
The hideous plague-fiend may prepare
His weapons for an onslaught there.
From the dire stench and sickening smell,
The devil himself would run pell mell;
While up the town the watering carts
Give shower-baths to the 'gentle parts',
Laying the dust for fear 'twould rise
To offend some Mrs Caudle's eyes;
The unfashionable lanes and streets,
Of want and misery the retreats,
In their foul wretchedness remain,
Like hell, eternally unclean:
Till some day, from the putrid parts,
Contagion with a vengeance starts;
And walks the dwellings of the town,
The affrighted people sweeping down,
Then there is hurrying to and fro,
Hearses, and palls, and cries of woe;
Doctors and coffin-makers wade
Up to their chins in mortal trade;
From den to den the inspectors run,
To see where cleansing should be done".

The Bard did not exaggerate. A citizen signing himself "Medicus" wrote to the **Limerick Chronicle**, on 23rd February 1871:

"... when passing through some of the streets of Limerick at night the odours which salute the nostrils are frequently of a most abominable and sickening description, arising chiefly, I believe, through want of closets and the other usual conveniences of civilised life in very many houses, where not even a connecting sewer is to be found between the premises and the five mains, which were constructed six or seven years ago at the cost of several thousand pounds by the citizens.

"From such houses it is the practice to empty in the streets at night vessels containing all kinds of abomination, and there it lies diffusing its pestilential odours till morning, when the broom, shovel, and cart of the scavenger do their work in the ineffective manner in which such work must always be done.

"What becomes of the scavengers' gatherings? These, with street sweepings and scrapings, entrails, and every filth that can be got together are carted off to the rising ground near Gallows Green, where the Corporation have established their 'Manure Depot' in the midst of a populous neighbourhood, and close to the Lunatic Asylum, County Gaol, County Infirmary, and St. John's Fever Hospital, and a locality greatly favoured by nature, which ought to be amongst the healthiest about the city, is subjected to the miasma arising from this extensive receptacle of odour and filth".

A decade later, conditions had not improved. On 11th November 1880, the **Limerick Chronicle** returned to the familiar theme:

"The condition of the streets of the city is a matter which comes home to everyone of its inhabitants and never has the condition of our highways and byeways been in such deplorable state. The neglect is not now, as heretofore, confined to unfrequented localities. The principal streets of the city are at present as disgracefully kept as the back slums. It would appear as if a reckless spirit of defiance had seized either the Corporation or its officials and that the health and comfort of the citizens were regarded as of no account".

The records of the Limerick Public Health Committee are crammed with accounts of the city's squalor and of the unavailing efforts of the inspectors to combat it. The old, crowded parts of Limerick, particularly the Irishtown, featured prominently in these records. A few typical examples for the year 1884 refer to "the state of Mrs. Spellacy's kitchen in Kerry Bow where she keeps a pig" and to the cramped conditions in Black Bull Lane where Johanna Bourke "kept a donkey, two pigs and a flock of poultry, in a back yard where the donkey had no room to turn about". Two more entries in the same year describe even worse situations. In Cornwallis Street (now Gerald Griffin Street), James Ryan "kept two pigs in a hole off the kitchen" and in Carr Street a short distance away, we find a reference to "the insanitary state of Thomas Ryan's house where he keeps pigs under the stairs".

Park itself did not escape the attention of the Health Committee. In 1885 authority was given to summon 30 persons in Park in order "to remove manure heaps, etc." Later in the same year the insanitary state of the houses in Park was again discussed by the committee and "executive notices were ordered to be served". In 1886, twenty eight Park people were brought to the notice of the committee for having manure and cesspools adjoin-



Manure sale advertisement on the doorway of the Town Hall.

ing their houses. Perhaps the committee was beginning to lose some of its resolve in its war on dirt for only those with the cesspools were directed to be summoned, the reference to the manure being deleted in the other cases.

During this period, the wealthy businessman, John Norris Russell, frequently travelled from his country home, through the city and Park, on his coach journey to his flour mills at Corbally. It appears from his high living standard that manure and its smells did not impinge too deeply on his consciousness. His attitude to the people who were forced to spend their lives in filthy surroundings can be gauged from his revealing comment: "Sensitive noses are the ruination of poor people".

At that time foul smells were an accepted part of life for the people living in the slums. The streets were seldom without heaps of manure and stagnant pools. Dr. Browne, the Local Government Inspector, in 1891, described the filthy condition of the roads and lanes, with ashes, house slops and manure being deposited in the public streets. He concluded: It will not be possible to keep the streets and laneways clean until each house is provided with running water, sanitary conveniences, and the means of disposing of house slops, etc." So it is evident that the Parkmen had plenty of scope - and material - for the dyking activities.

The efforts of the Parkmen thus supplemented the street cleaning service provided by the Limerick Corporation's own fleet of horse-drawn dung-carts. The dung-cart had an all-iron body, shaped like a cylinder split through its diameter. The powerful shafts were independent of the body and attached to the wheels, which were about six feet high. The fetid cargo was disgorged by the release of a ratchet which caused the cart to pivot backwards on the axle which passed through its centre. The mechanism of the 'tumbling tub' was simple, consisting only of a lever, chain and wheel. The cart was specially adapted for the type of work in which it was engaged and, in retrospect, no other arrangement could have worked so effectively. The workers who swept the streets and loaded the dung-carts worked from six in the

morning to six in the evening. The dirty nature of this task took a heavy toll on the olfactory nerves and clothing of the workers, but these considerations received scant attention at the time.

The collected manure was brought to a field near the Fairgreen where towards the end of April or early in May, the annual Corporation 'green' dung auction took place. Here the year's sweepings of the insanitary streets and alleys, stables and pigsties were sold to the highest bidder. The day was an important one for the Park people. In the green was the most valuable fertiliser, which could be guaranteed to yield the best crops in the fastest time. The foul assortment of city sewerage - human and animal - jam-jars, bottles, tin cans, broken crockery, cinders, ashes, and other such-like rubbish was stored in neat piles about three feet apart. This work was carried out by Corporation cleansing workers employed at the dump.

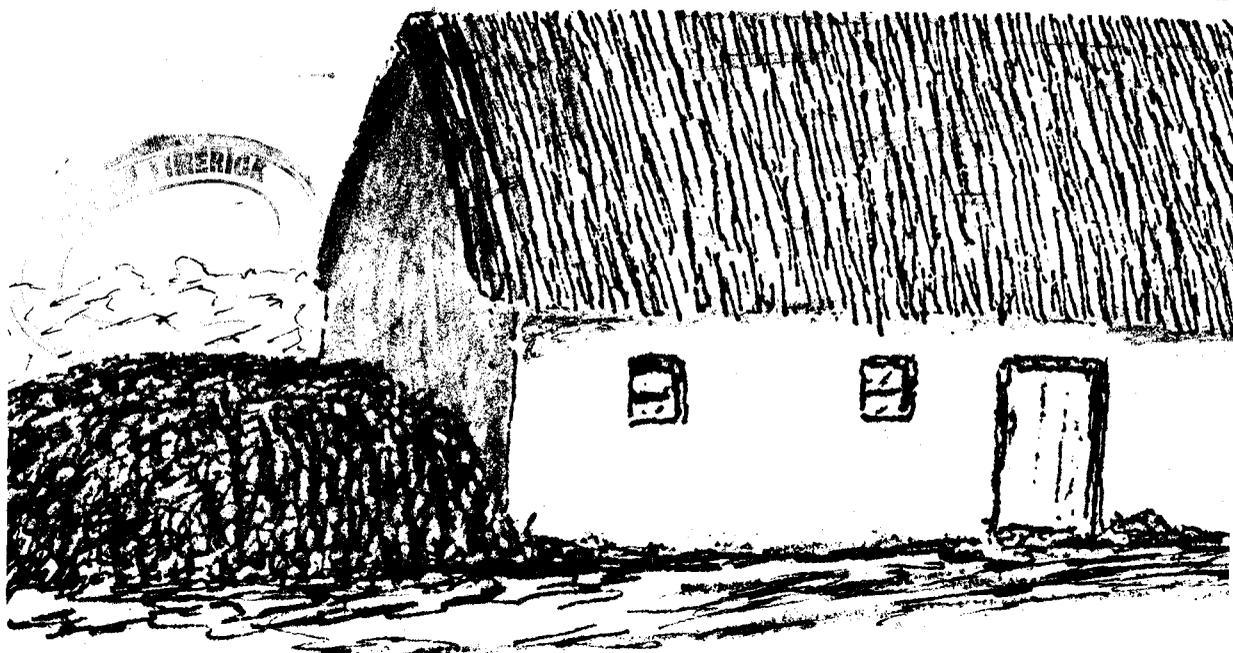
A few months after collection, the more volatile organic substances were usually reduced to a tolerable chemical element by the millions of microscopic invaders that set about it in its pristine condition. The Parkmen found the manure 'sweet' and agreeable to handle. It was said that they had developed a merciful immunity to the vile commodity which caused Limerick people to give the Fairgreen district a wide berth. The city folk could never divorce the dung from its origins. In addition to the gardeners, a small number of outsiders usually took part in the bidding at the dung auction. The Brownes of Truagh Castle were enthusiastic seekers after the nightmarish mixture and their anxiety to secure the manure often inflated the price, much to the discomfiture of the Parkmen.

Many stories are told about the love of the market-gardeners for their precious dung. One tale tells of how a Parkman was bringing home a load from Shaw's Bacon Factory. The cart was an old one and the top cover had long ago rotten off. The wheels had also seen better days, and outside a house in Garryowen the cart came a cropper. A wheel came off pitching the driver, the horse and the mess of manure on to the roadway. But the shaken Parkman showed scant concern for his horse, his cart or himself. Rushing into Doyle's house he shouted: "Come out quick and mind the manure; don't let anyone steal it before I get back with a new wheel!" The fact that most people would want to put as far a distance between themselves and the stinking pile did not matter to the single-minded carter.

The traditional forms of fertiliser were supplemented and, in many cases, superseded by the offals from Limerick's bacon factories. Often called 'blood' manure, this organic matter decayed quickly and gave off a vile odour which can be better imagined than described. The vegetables produced in Park were of the finest quality but, because of the intensive use of this type of manure, some city people were convinced that the crops were 'forced' and that the crimson tinge on the outer leaves of some cabbages was caused by the plants having imbibed the blood of the offals. It was thought that the gardeners, being too impatient to wait for the normal harvest time, had unnaturally forced the vegetables out of the ground by the sheer virulence of the compost.

The preservative qualities of Park manure featured in a new and macabre drama during a famous murder in the last century, when it was disclosed that the body had been found buried in a dunghill.

The daily trafficking in manure earned for the district the unflattering title of 'Dirty Park'. As the horse-carts, laden with the smelly, soggy substance, dripped their slow way through Limerick streets from the bacon factories the settling manure brought an oily liquid to the top. With the daylight shimmering on the dung's multicoloured surface, children playing on the footpaths



would chant:

"P-a-a-r-k is a dirty place,
And so are all its people;
They pile their dung outside their doors,
As high as Mary's steeple".

But the jibe was unfair to the Park people, who unlike the country farmers, could not afford to rest their fields. People with only a passing acquaintance with the district could not appreciate that the organic fertiliser was an indispensable commodity in reviving plots jaded from centuries of intensive tillage. The market-gardeners, however, knew that what 'made the crops to grow' and that was all that mattered to them. Even the cow parsnip along the headlands vied with its giant cousin in stature and bloom and everywhere the vegetation, in field, in garden and hedge owed its lush vitality to the blood manure and the foul, festering sweepings of the lanes of Limerick.

Outsiders' who came to live in Park had to accept the traditions and smells of the district. But one formidable new resident found the burden of history - and manure - a bit too much.

There was no mistaking his military-style training - the regular effortless gait, the great shoulders, square and loose, and the towering frame moving with a regularity that owed much to long stints on the barrack square - for Diarmuid O'Dailaig; was an ex-R.I.C. man. In general, he was what the locals called 'a fine cut of a man', and so he was, when he came to live in Park in the 1930s.

He settled into his new house - 'St. Rita's' - on the canal bank where, no doubt, he intended to enjoy a carefree retirement. Indeed, it was an ideal place to live: the old canal in perfect condition, the Slieve Barna hills in the distance and Keeper Mountain standing over the head of the canal to the east. Everything looked rosy and peaceful until Diarmuid's olfactory nerves became stimulated by the dreadful effluvia from the Park gardens. He had reckoned without the thousand years old smell of Park.

The terrible stench from the offals and blood manure from the bacon factories was bearable only by those who lived by it and those who accepted it as an essential part of the ancient landscape. Diarmuid fitted into neither category. He began to complain, but not to the people of Park: he shouted his protests through the columns of the local press.

While he wrote letters on many subjects - he was an able and interesting letter writer - the Park manure was

his principal subject. Of course, the Parkmen laughed at, and ignored, his wailings.

The shrewd old policeman knew that his protestes were useless, yet he continued to show his disgust in the usual way. He knew as well as everyone else that it was impossible to change the ways and habits of an ancient people. Then came a breakthrough in the battle. Diarmuid had been studying the table manners of the myriad seagulls that were as much a part of the gardens as the vegetables. He learned that these birds washed every foul smelling morsel they picked up on dry land before eating it. He was convinced that the Park gulls brought their decaying tit-bits to the city reservoir on the Fairgreen and had a 'general wash and brush-up' there before returning to the gardens for more.

In a memorable letter to the **Limerick Leader**, Diarmuid contended that the city water supply was dangerously contaminated and made a strong case for the abatement of the nuisance. People began to take notice: even the Public Health Authorities sat up. Some people were so shocked at the thought of drinking water in which thousands of seagulls had washed putrid offals that they paid more frequent visits to a few wells and pumps around Limerick. Health officers made a more thorough examination of the complaint - when they were not beaten back by the smell. They were content to make recommendations that nefarious matter must no longer be spread on open ground.

The market gardeners were furious at this interference with their methods of producing bumper crops of prime vegetables all the year round. It was pointed out by one Parkman at the time, that at least two senior members of the Health Committee had a short time before remarked on the excellent quality of the Park garden produce. The gardeners got a further boost from the late Dr. McPolin (afterward County M.O.H.), who declared that no one knew more about fertilising land than the Parkmen, and that the vegetables they produced were of the first quality.

The furore gradually died down, and the Parkmen bent to their old tasks. Diarmuid was learning to come to terms with the atmosphere that pervaded the townland in which he had chosen to live like a blanket. A few vengeful young tillers of the soil roughed him up one dark night, but soon all was forgotten.

Sadly, a few years afterwards, this fine old character was accidentally drowned in the canal, having lost his footing while on his way home.