Regular hiring fairs took place at Stony Thursday Corner, at the junction of Mungret Street, John Street and Broad Street. The fairs later moved the short distance to Baal's Bridge, until they eventually petered out after the second World War. The agricultural workers, or spalpeens, from all parts congregated with their spades, forks and hay-pikes seeking work. Those lucky enough to be hired were employed and paid by the day. Up to 1940, the labourers were paid at the rate of four shillings a day and their meals. Accommodation could be had in the many crowded lodging-houses in Mungret Street and Denmark Street for a shilling a night.

The story of the lives and labour of these wandering workers has never been told. Histories of the working class, have shied away from this subject. But there are some sources available that give a picture of the kind of men who came to work in Park and of their wretched living and working conditions.

In a report on agricultural labourers in the Kilmallock district, presented to the Royal Commission on Labour, in February 1893, an assistant commissioner, W.P. O'Brien, stated that it had become the established usage of the country to obtain labourers annually by migration from the eastern borders of Kerry, and the adjoining districts of West Cork. He then went on to describe the scene at the Kilmallock Hiring Fair:

"These immigrants, consisting of both men and women - the latter greatly the predominant element - usually arrive by train at Kilmallock on certain days in March - notably on the 17th and 25th of the month - when they are met at the railway station by the farmers from all the surrounding districts, and amidst a scene of unwonted animation and bustle, are at once engaged by them, and then and there borne off to their respective houses."

Labour-hungry spalpeens flocked to the Kilmallock and Limerick fairs. The system was the Irish version of the slave trade and was riddled with class distinction. In a section on social structure in the Limerick Rural Survey 1958-'64, Patrick McNabb wrote: "In very large farm houses the workers dined in a separate room. This seemed to cause less friction than the custom in smaller, houses where the workers dined with the..."
family in the kitchen. The workers sat at a separate table, were given inferior food, used different crockery and, in some cases, were not given cutlery. Though the evening meal, they were not encouraged to stay in the kitchen. During winter time this caused much hardship, as there was no warm place to rest in the evenings. Even their bedroom was not a refuge, as this was usually an unheated outhouse. One got the impression of a life of hopeless drudgery.

The labourers were not organised and there were few to fight or even speak out for their rights. A brief but revealing part of the report by W.P. O’Reilly to the Royal Commission on Labour told all: “Trade Unions: No Existence”. Long after 1930, when wages and conditions of work were fixed by law, farmers still continued to pay slave wages.

Some of the workers found employment in Park, where they got big meals and small pay. Women workers from the Abbey, known as “the weeder”, also worked there for two shillings a day, with a few glasses of porter thrown in. Two prominent Limerick businessmen started their working lives, most of the travelling agricultural workers died penniless in bleak workhouses and county homes. Gayboy was the exception to the general rule.

But perhaps the most famous of all the daily labourers was the Limerick man “Floods” Hickey. Floods was a rugged character who was renowned for his hard work, his hatred of “countrymen” and his affection for the products of Arthur Guinness. He was a familiar figure, not only in Park, but also around the pubs in Tullow and Broad Street. His is a Floods1-eye view of the Park Danes, as seen from the cabbage stumps, and provides a robust contrast to Canon Ross-Lewin’s pastoral poem, “The Men of Park”.

Gayboy slept out in Plassey Wood during the summer. He rarely worked on Wednesdays, being only too ready to draw his British pension, back a few horses and drink the rest of his money at Jack Walsh’s pub in Plassey. He died at an advanced age, in the Soldiers’ Home in Cork. His remains were brought back by his friends and buried in his native Doonans. After their hard-working lives, most of the travelling agricultural workers died penniless in bleak workhouses and county homes. Gayboy was the exception to the general rule.

Gayboy will recall a towering, well proportioned man in a navy-blue suit and polo-necked jumper. He never appeared dirty, even after a hard day’s work. His acquaintances attributed his remarkably clean and tidy appearance to his training in H.M. Navy during the first World War. His sense of humour equalled his expertise with the spade or scythe and many a lively gathering was enlivened by his graphic descriptions of sea monsters and shipwrecks in the North Sea. He was never known to lose his temper, even when in his cups.

Gayboy says to have written in his honour. Danny O’Connell, the Penn-