

# The Park Dances

## The Daily Labourers

by Jim Kemmy



*The Paupers' Cross at St. Bridget's Graveyard, where many of the local farm labourers were buried.*

**R**egular 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:

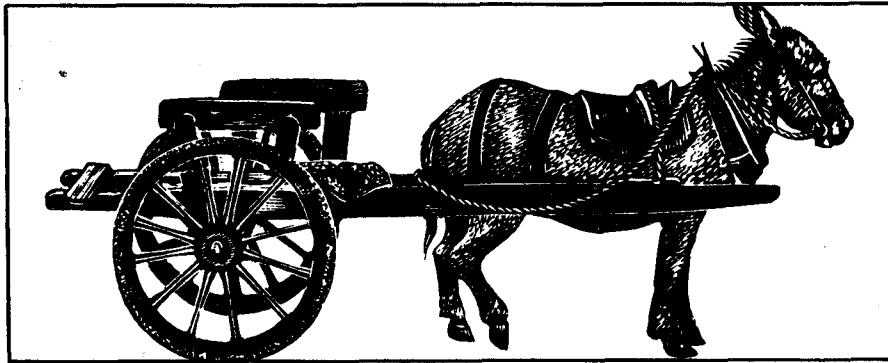
"These immigrants, consisting of both men and women - the latter greatly the predominant element - usually arrive by train at Kilmallock on certain days in March - notably on the 17th and 25th of the month - when they are met at the railway station by the farmers from all the surrounding districts, and 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. After 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'Brien 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 weeders", also worked there for two shillings a day, with a few glasses of porter thrown in. Two prominent Limerick businessmen started their working careers in Park. Before the second War, a wiry youth, who is now a fruit and vegetable dealer, got five shillings for a full week's weeding. In 1940, a ten-year-old boy, who later graduated to become a city jeweller, fared better: he earned a half-crown for a long day's work pulling weeds. He travelled to his first All-Ireland hurling final on this sum, spending two shillings and three pence on his fare.

The Parkman's aptitude for hard work and his experience on the land discouraged the malingerer and the work-shy. Though the class difference between the "Danes" and the labourers was not as pronounced as in rural areas, there was room only for the very best workers. The Parkman expected the labourer to work as hard as he did himself and that meant the highest and hardest of working standards. Many of the workers came from Co. Galway and one of the greatest of these was the legendary figure Stephen Geoghan, better known as "the Galway Man".

Another man who measured up to the stringent requirements was Patrick

O'Byrnes. Those who remember 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 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 Doonass. 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.

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 Pennywell, Broad Street and Mungret Street up to about forty years ago. Wherever he went his lively flow of speech was a popular attraction.

Floods was one of the few daily labourers ever to have a work written in his honour. Danny O'Connell, the Pennywell rhymer, in a mock-heroic epic titled, "Floods", celebrates the wandering, dissolute life of Hickey. In the verses O'Connell gives a Floods'-eye view of the Park Danes, as seen from beneath the cabbage stumps, and provides a robust contrast to Canon Ross-Lewin's pastoral poem, "The Men of Park". In this extract Floods takes time out to vent his spleen on the hapless countrymen, then goes on to describe his work for the Parkmen and rounds off with a litany of his favourite houses

of refreshment:-

*"But there's one thing rises dander  
In your humble servant 'Floods',  
There's no-one safe in any job  
With all the country mugs;  
They're here from Ardnacrusha,  
They're here from Dooradoyle,  
They're here from Annacotty,  
They're here from Barnakyle;  
They walk from Castleconnell,  
They run in from Raheen,  
They come from every village,  
They sneak around for jobs,  
They work for half the city rate,  
The dirty rotten yobs.  
I slaved down in the Tanyard,  
And did an honest day,  
But a rat came in from Corofin,  
And worked for under pay,  
When I was fired, I argued a lot,  
They said I had no claim,  
So I had to leave my place of birth,  
To harvest for the Dane.*

*I sowed for Neddy Lawlor,  
I mowed for Mick the Dane,  
I built a shed for Mike Clancy,  
With the help of Medium Kane,  
I grew plants for Flytail Hogan,  
Cleared drains for Yellow Jack,  
I fed pigs for Johnnie Cusack,  
And milked cows for Monday Mack,  
I stole dung from Biddy Wattle,  
When she lived out in Rhebogue,  
I grew mangolds for Ryan Whistler,  
And turnips for Sean Og,  
I dug spuds for Sogger Lawlor,  
And ploughed for Pa Cunneen,  
I threshed for Bawney Penny,  
And saved hay for Ryan Bulleen,  
I worked for all the Cusacks,  
And the Crosses for a while,  
But I would not work for Marlo Mullins  
For all the wealth of Patsy Doyle.*

*And when the harvest would be over,  
I'd bid the Danes farewell,  
With their headlands and their  
lowlands,  
I'd pitch them all to hell.  
With a thirst just like a limekiln,  
I'd sail into the city,  
And kick off at Pat McGrath's;  
I'd visit all my usual haunts,  
Where I spent some happy days;  
I'd fall out of Jim Mulready's,  
I'd steal up to 'Taste me Butter's',  
And down to Mrs. Jack's,  
I'd ring at 'Box of Bones',  
If I stood at Quilligan's,  
I surely fall at Owen's,  
The pint is good at Clohessy's,  
And fair enough at White's,  
But it's always in condition  
At Mick Hishon's and McKnight's".*

This piece of doggerel serves as an epitaph for all the labourers who toiled in Park. They will never find a place in the conventional history books of Limerick. But, as Thomas Gray put it: "Let not ambition mock their useful toil / The homely joys and destiny obscure; / Nor Grandeur hear, with a disdainful smile, / the short and simple annals of the poor".

