

END OF AN ERA

FAREWELL TO TWO CENTURIES OF THE GILLMOR RETAIL BUSINESS

Des Gillmor

THE GILLMOR supermarket in Dromahair ceased trading on 26th October 2013. The Gillmor family had been involved for nearly two centuries, making it the oldest business in Dromahair and one of the oldest family retail businesses in Co Leitrim. Has any other shop in Leitrim been owned and operated under the one family name for this length or longer?

The earliest known reference to the Gillmor involvement in business is in 1829. This is in the Drumlease Church of Ireland Parish baptismal records, where Hugh Gillmor, the father of a child Isabella, is stated to be a shopkeeper. The Drumlease records began only in 1827 and Hugh and Anne had children from at least as early as 1815, so that if there had been baptismal records for them, Hugh might have been described as a shopkeeper at dates before 1829. Some unauthenticated references put the date of establishment at about 1820.

The earliest known printed record of the Gillmor involvement in retailing is the entry for Dromahair in Slater's National Commercial Directory of Ireland, 1846. Two Gillmor businesses were listed: Anne Gillmor was described as a grocer and draper and Hugh Gillmor as a grocer and publican. There was only one other grocer, William McKee, and one other publican,



Patrick Hozey. No drapers were listed but there were three tailors and three shoemakers in the village.

Anne Gillmor (1816-1881) must have been an early young female entrepreneur. Her premises was 'St Anne's', on the corner of Back Line and Market Street. This house was registered solely in the name of Anne but a large shop nameplate, found in the attic and kindly given to me by the present owners of the house, Mr and Mrs Carre, is J STUART & A GILLMOR. The first name seems likely to have been that of Jane Stuart, probably a sister-in-law of Anne's brother Robert, and she is buried in the Gillmor plot at Dromahair Church of Ireland. The Dromahair market house and courthouse were directly behind St. Anne's, on what was formerly known as Gillmor Hill.

It seems that Anne Gillmor

■ **Stuart and Jessie Gillmor with seven of their children in the late 1890s**

went to America in 1850 but it is not known for how long. She accompanied her brother Robert, his wife and their child on board the ship America from Liverpool to New York in April of that year. That family went west to Iowa to farm but census records show that Anne was not with them there and they returned to Leitrim in 1853. Anne remained the registered occupant of St Anne's until her death but the rateable valuation was reduced in 1877 because business there had ceased and letting to lodgers was recorded. Anne died single and aged 64 in January 1881.

Hugh (1783-1871) had been reared in the townland of Sliganagh on the road towards Ballintogher. The farm remains

in the ownership of descendants of his brother John. Their parents, Hugh and Mary, both of whom died in 1830, are buried inside the ruins of Killery Church on the road to Innisfree.

Hugh had land in the area but he seems to have moved to live and engage in business in Dromahair. This is likely to have been where the current Gillmor premises are on Main Street, as the 1837 Ordnance Survey 1:10,560 map suggests. Hugh was involved also in construction. The bridge beside the former railway station and the Riverbank Restaurant bears the inscription 'H. Gillmor AD 1846' and also he built the road around Sir Robert's Point on Lough Gill. Hugh died in 1871, aged 88. His wife Anne, aged 72, had predeceased him in 1864, "...after a long and painful illness, which she bore with patience and christian fortitude", as reported in the Sligo Independent of 16th April.

Hugh's business transferred to his grandson, Stuart John Gillmor (1851-1935). He had been born in Iowa as the second son of Robert and Mary Anne. In 1878 he married Jessie Hosie who was born in Scotland in 1850. She was a member of the family that operated the grain mill on the River Bonet at the western end of Dromahair, now occupied by the OPW, and later at the railway station.

The addition of a bakery was a major business diversification. The Sligo Champion of 1st February 1890 reported on the opening of a bakery in his yard by Stuart J Gillmor. The installation of an oven superior

to those in general use in the western counties at that time enabled bread of higher quality to be supplied to the surrounding area. The

paper commented that "It is a pleasing duty to note that the spirit of enterprise, which has laid hold of Ireland, has become tangible in Dromahaire through the instrumentality of such a worthy gentleman". The bread was delivered over quite a wide area by horse-drawn vans and later by motorised vehicles, though maintaining the early versions of the motor vans in running order on the roads of that time was not easy.

A major fire in 1911 was a serious setback to the bakery. The Leitrim Observer of 23rd September reported that "The public was astonished to hear of the disastrous fire at Dromahair a few nights since when the extensive bakery premises of



■ The Gillmor yard in the days of the horse-drawn bread vans

Mr S J Gilmour were completely gutted, and a large quantity of flour, machinery, etc destroyed". Prompt action by villagers in forming a human chain to bring buckets of water from the Bonet millrace to the scene helped to prevent the spread of the fire to adjoining buildings. The bakery reopened but a strike by employees and the difficulty of competing with a larger scale bakery in Sligo heralded the end of the Gillmor bakery in the 1920s.

■ One of the facilities in the Gillmor yard was a weigh-bridge for live-stock





Presumably through the influence of their Scottish mother, the eight surviving children of Stuart and Jessie were sent to secondary school in Glasgow, with a flat being rented for them in the Gorbals district. Six of them emigrated, the only male remaining in Ireland being Alfred (Alfie) (1890-1982), the second youngest boy. He wished to become a missionary but he came back to the business to help in dealing with its very substantial debt. He worked extremely hard in relation to the shop, bakery and farm.

The political situation of the early 1920s impacted on the Gillmor family in addition to its effect on business in general. One instance followed from Alfie teaching his father to drive. As the car was getting rather close to the edge of the road, he suggested to Stuart that he might move away from it, with the response of a sharp pull over the edge into a bog. Stuart later explained that he thought the steering wheel was like the rudder of a boat so that a pull to the left would make the vehicle turn to the right! The documentation required for cars at that time had been given to an employee to deliver to the authorities in Manorhamilton but he had not done so because of his Republican feelings. When Alfie was taking the car to Sligo for repairs he was stopped by the police, who assumed that this badly damaged car for which there was no permit had been in an ambush, so that he was consigned to Sligo Jail. On the official prison



■ The interior of the Gillmor shop prior to its conversion to self-service in the 1950s, including (from top to bottom) Alfred, May and John Gillmor

register for 1921, the space for his offence is blank. He was there for nearly a week before the family managed to have him released.

Another incident occurred where the door of the Gillmor premises was broken down in a midnight raid apparently in search of money and petrol. Seeing a gun being held to her husband's head with threats was thought by the family to have initiated the illness that led to Jessie's death in January 1923.

In 1929 Alfie married Anna May Pollock (1903-1990) from near Swanlinbar, Co Cavan. She had come to work in the Gillmor shop, having served her time to the drapery trade in an Enniskillen business. Subsequently several girls from the Cavan-Monaghan area joined the staff. May worked in and oversaw the drapery sector of the business for decades.

The Gillmor business was highly diversified, in common with many other 'country stores' in Irish villages that supplied most of the needs of the inhabitants of the villages and the surrounding rural areas. In addition to a wide range of grocery and drapery products, there was a substantial hardware trade and timber, fuel, cement and animal feedstuffs were sold. Toys were part of the busy pre-Christmas trade. Prior to the arrival of a pharmacy in Dromahair, some human and animal medicinal products were stocked. Alfie had a reputation as an amateur vet from whom farmers sought advice and he dispensed his own treatment for application



to peoples' burns. Gillmor's were agents for transatlantic shipping lines, principally Cunard and White Star, and a surviving book records the names of emigrants from the area who purchased their tickets there.

Some older readers from the Dromahair area will remember the extent to which the interior of the shop contrasted with that of a modern supermarket. For customers entering through the front door, there was the grocery counter on the left, the drapery counter, with its glass case in which small items were displayed, on the right and the 'back counter' ahead of them. Customers who came from the yard to the area behind the back counter were mainly those purchasing goods from the yard. A great variety of items hung from the roof over the central area of the shop. Many products which now come in packages were stored loose in drawers and jars to be weighed out in the quantities required by individual customers.

A distinctive feature of the shop was the three 'carriers'; these were small containers

■ **An old view of the Gillmor premises on Main Street, Dromahair**

with wheels propelled on wires above head level carrying the money submitted by customers and corresponding dockets to the cash desk in a back corner of the shop, to be returned to the counters with the appropriate change. Purchases by people with accounts were recorded and later entered into ledger books. After the shop closed in the evenings, the takings were counted and balanced against the docket books by staff in the cash desk, while 'the boss' balanced purchases and receipts for that day at his desk in the other back corner.

Alfie continued to work in the shop until he was 91 but in 1956 he had been joined by his younger son John, who left Sligo Grammar and High School after the Intermediate Certificate Examination. John was instrumental in a major reorganisation of the shop to self-service. This included ending most drapery lines and expanding the space necessary to stock and display the

ever-increasing range of grocery and hardware products sought by customers. Gillmor's joined the Spar independent affiliated trader group in 1973.

In turn, John's younger son Vernon joined the business in 2001. Prompted by the modern growth in the population of Dromahair, a further major expansion and reorganisation of the supermarket



was undertaken. The floor area of the premises trebled. Modern chilled and frozen food equipment was installed and innovations included the provision of a deli and coffee machine. An office and staff facilities were added at the back of the premises.

The Gillmor business had survived periods of major difficulties over the past hundred years, from the War of Independence and the Civil War, through the great depression of the 1930s, the supply and food rationing problems at the time of the Second World War and the major decline in Leitrim's population. The record of 'bad debts' is one aspect of the trading difficulties; comments that were written beside some of these in the record book include 'dead – forgiven', 'has no money', 'loss', 'says paid', 'hopeless', 'gone to England—shall have

to forgive'. Many people have testified to the extent to which Gillmor's helped them raise their families. Through the ups and downs, hard-working and loyal staff contributed to the survival and success of the business. In recent years, however, factors such as the major trend towards increased concentration of trade in the larger companies and urban centres, shopping in Northern Ireland, the economic recession and the collapse of the construction industry took their toll. The family could no longer maintain a loss-making business.

At closing time on the evening of Saturday 26th October 2013, this notice was posted on the door of the supermarket: "The Gillmor family very much regret that, due to circumstances beyond our control, we are no longer in a position to continue trading. As a family-run business,

■ **The Gillmor premises after its closure in 2013**

it has been our pleasure to serve the community, and we find it extremely difficult and sad to have to close the doors after 200 years. We would like to sincerely thank everybody for their valued custom. We also take this opportunity to wish everyone good health and happiness for the future."

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