

"THE OLD ORDER changeth and yieldeth place to the New". The little town of Mohill, nestling in the dip between the hills has been well and truly hit by the winds of change in the last few decades.

Until recent years Mohill boasted a monthly fair and a weekly market. In addition it had three big noted fairs throughout the year — 25 February known as "Manachan Day", 8 May and 19 October. There were also special markets held during the month of December known as the big markets. Business at the fairs started up early and cattle changed hands on the spacious fairgreen and its approaches. The sale of horses, young calves and bonhams usually dragged on later. In those days before the lorry and tractor came on the scene cattle were invariably taken to the fair on foot which meant an early start for farmers coming a distance.

"CAVEAT EMPTOR"

The old unwritten law 'Caveat Emptor' (let the buyer beware) governed all transactions unless otherwise arranged. Thus, the man who purchased the animal which afterwards proved faulty rarely had any redress. Great numbers of cattle were on sale by the farmers of the surrounding countryside, who depended on the sale of their stock to live and pay their way. On the Wednesday preceding the cattle fairs the pigs were sold. They had to be taken out of the cart and held on the street by means of a rope on the hind leg. Not a pleasant occupation on a cold frosty morning! This was known as selling your pig on the rope. Like the cattle most of the pigs were taken away on the old Narrow Gauge Railway.

NORTHERN BUYERS

In the crisp morning air the clipped accents of the Northern buyers were much in evidence mingling with the softer more mellow tones of the Leitrim people. Those Northern dealers bought a great number of cattle of all types. Their absence usually meant a bad slow fair. Those men usually wore the cattleman's brown boots and in cold weather a light coat over a heavier inside coat, the inevitable stick and occasionally an umbrella.

DEALERS' SARTORIAL BADGE

Looking back now I think the horse dealers were more interesting and colourful. They usually wore the brown

high boots too, a hat well turned up at the sides and nicely tilted. No man in this trade would be regarded as 'Horsey' unless he sported the ever present light cravat round his neck with the peculiar knot and the two ends nicely tucked on each side. Even his humbler friend dealing in donkeys sported the same sartorial badge of his way of living.

"LUCK PENNY"

In looking over a horse in which you were interested you might well be told "she is a good gassy mare". You might not know at that particular time that the "gassy" part of the same lady's personality had more connection with



Eslin born Joseph Gilchrist who lives and works in Dublin has been of immense help to the Leitrim Guardian Committee. His contribution this year will bring back happy memories to many people.

difference accompanied by the usual hand-clapping, talk and banter. The purchaser often asked for a good "Luck Penny" as the final word in finishing a deal. A small fee had to be paid to the good people who collected the town tolls and kept the fairgreen and town scales in order.

Potatoes, oats, fowl, mostly chickens, and of course geese and turkeys during the Christmas period, had their own street where the town scales were used for weighing the produce. The young calves were sold in Glebe St., and many changed hands over a drink in the adjacent public house, while the patient little animal chewed its cud on the other end of the rope outside the door. Litters of pink, lusty bonhams, changed hands in the same area. Many a rosy-cheeked farmers daughter stood at a discreet distance from where her father was selling hoping that he was getting a good price so she could have a new coat or shoes which she well deserved.

"Type of the wise who soar but never roam,

True to its kindred points of heaven and home."

STANDINGS.

On the streets were many stalls or 'standings'. Almost anything could be bought on the standings — clothing new and second-hand, kitchen-ware, tools, delph, etc. Many of the stall holders were 'characters'. Their extravagant praise for their wares, their pungent wit and sarcasm were a treat to listen to providing you were not on the receiving end. "If it rained butcher's knives and baker's wives for forty days and forty nights you would still be dry in the overcoat he was trying to sell

FAIR DAY MEMORIES OF MOHILL

her foot work that her usefulness in plough or machine. If you were unfortunate enough to incur the wrath of the horse dealer and found yourself at the business end of an ash-plant it was always better to make an orderly if hasty retreat like King James at the Battle of the Boyne, and hope for less serious consequences. Battered pride heals faster than a battered head.

In all dealings at fairs and markets if the seller was asking a realistic price and the buyer similarly offered, a third party intervened and divided the

you". "It will wash like a cup and saucer and wear like a woman's tongue". Those flashes come to mind.

PEGGY'S LEG.

Young boys could spend their money on Peggy's leg, a kind of sugar stick, on dates, or on the boiled sweets out of the gallon. I remember gooseberries being sold by the glass tumberful for a penny. There was also another treat for thirsty boys. A spoonful of coloured effervescent powder was put in a glass of water and

sold as the well-remembered "penny fizz".

BLACK DOCTORS AND CON-MEN

Doctors, black and white, came to cure all ills. One of them offered an infallible hair restorer which was bought by many to try putting hair back on balding domes. One super salesman in this line of business advised great care in handling the stuff. It was known to have grown hair on the palm of the hand in some cases. The old wheel of fortune, the game in which you backed a colour on the table before he spun the wheel. It stopped at the winning colour. If you were looking too long without playing he might remind you 'we don't keep lodgers'.

In the public houses the farmers had their few drinks and discussed cattle and prices. When the door at the back of the bar opened you could see the cattle outside from your high stool on the sawdust. Emerging from the pub you immediately got the smell of cattle and horses and further on the distinctly pleasant and homely smell of onions frying in the eating houses. Those places have all been upgraded to restaurants in the meantime.

At the corner a lusty ballad-singer squared his shoulders and rendered a

song of the period while a pal went around with a hat to collect coppers from the audience. Farmers removed their pipes and listened, looking at the ground appreciatively...

"I long to ramble down the old breen

Where the hawthorn blossoms are in bloom

To sit by the gate on an auld mossy sate,

A whispering to Kate Muldoon".

A three card-trick man who was taking small bets against anyone finding the elusive queen sees the men in blue approaching and the cards disappear. Immediately he is in another and more respectable business. He is selling a preparation for removing stains.

As the evening advances and people are heading for home you could easily find a very solid neighbour in a dispute over a sale or a "luck penny". With a moustache bristling at half-mast he informs all around him that he never did anything mean and could always hold his own. No doubt the few drinks loosened up his tongue and his courage.

THE OLD ORDER CHANGETH —

Alas, it has all come to an end. Mohill has a modern mart where the farmers sell their stock in comfort

under cover and get the best prices. Bad fairs and bad prices are a thing of the past for which everyone must be thankful. We can all remember standing in sleet and rain, stick in hand, waiting for a buyer for cattle. They were often scarce and shy. All the dealers, farmers, stall holders, shopkeepers and characters who made up the human panorama are all having their last long sleep. The last pound has been divided, the last "luck penny" handed over and the last "that she may be lucky".

Tradition has it that St. Patrick has been given the right to judge the Irish and who could grudge the great saint that assignment! When the motley patrons of the fairs in Mohill of yesteryear appear before our national Apostle I am sure he will have to smile. When he moves among them and hears the Northern accents it will remind him of Sliabh Mish where he spent some years of his youth. Being the decent man that he is he will surely give the wink to St. Peter who does traffic duty at the Golden Gate, and the green light will shine for them all as they are waved through into the realms of glory and they won't have to pay 'custom'.

"On the Market" Today — Manorhamilton Mart

Photo: D.D.

