

‘A DROP OF THE HARD STUFF...’

Local Inns, hostelries, pubs and publicans

BY HELENA GAMBLE

It is unclear when exactly distilling was first introduced into Ireland. References to “aqua vitae” which comes from Latin, meaning “water of Life” and in Irish translates to “uisce beatha,” do not appear in Irish sources until the 14th century, though it is generally thought that the process of distilling was invented in the 12th Century, possibly in Italy or Spain. According to the dictionary the word “usquebaugh” refers to a broad category of alcoholic beverages that are distilled from fermented grain mash and aged in wooden casks (generally oak). Whiskey derives from the Gaelic word uisce, meaning water.

Some sources claim that the first written record of whiskey comes from Ireland in 1405, where it was distilled by monks. It is also mentioned in Scotland in 1496, where it is spelt ‘whisky’ - without the ‘e’. However it is generally thought that it had been around for at least several hundred years beforehand. Some academics believe distilled spirits were first produced between the 8th and 9th centuries A.D. in the Middle East, with the art of distillation being brought to Ireland and Britain by Christian monks. It is also possible that the distillation process was discovered in Ireland by farmers as a way of making use of excess grain after harvest.

Although whiskey may have only been produced since this time, fermented liquors such as ale and mead had long been the staple drinks among the Celtic peoples. References to great feats of beer drinking in the literature of Celtic Ireland were commonplace, one such reference, “Conchobor, King of Ulster, had at *Emain Macha*, a beer vat known as the “iron chasm” into which a hundred fillings went every evening, but which could satisfy all the warriors of Ulster at one sitting”

After the coming of Christianity, references to beer drinking were common. An early poem, attributed to St. Brigid, contains a description of heaven and includes the following:

*“I would like to have a great lake of beer for Christ the King
I’d like to be watching the heavenly family drinking it down through
all eternity”*

There appears to be no contradiction in these lines between devout Christianity and alcohol consumption. There are also references to wine around this time. In the famous poem “*The Old Woman of Bear*”, which probably dates from 10th century, the old woman laments,



**“Mrs Mann’s” pub circa 1900 - now the
‘Old Dyke Inn’**

*“I who had my days with Kings
And drank deep of mead and wine
Drink whey-water with old hags
Sitting in their rags and pine”*

As this verse indicates drinking was a noble pastime, suggestive of the wealth and hospitality of kings. Mead was regarded as a warrior’s drink, while only rulers could have afforded imported wine. The arrival of distilled drink in the 14th century and of more centralised Government in the 16th produced attitudes to alcohol that were more complicated and in some cases much more negative. Spirits were at first valued for their medicinal properties and in Europe the art of distilling was generally spread by monks and apothecaries. Spirit drinking became increasingly popular after the Black Death of late 1340 and spirits were frequently prescribed by doctors in cases of plague and other fevers. Yet surprisingly the first reference to the consumption of whiskey in Irish historical records was a decidedly negative one. The 1405 *Annals of Clonmacnoise* state “Richard Magrenell, chieftain of Moyntyreolas, died at Christmas by taking a surfeit of aqua vitae, to him aqua mortis! So much for the water of life!

By 1556 whiskey had become so popular that the English Government felt it necessary to impose legislative controls. The act decreed that “all those making whiskey, except for peers, gentlemen and borough freemen making it for their own use, would henceforth require a licence from the Lord Deputy.” Even at this early date whiskey was regarded by those in

authority as helping to foster a spirit of recklessness and rebelliousness among the Irish – an attitude which was to persist well into the 19th century. So dangerous was whiskey considered to be that its manufacture was banned in Munster in 1571. Sir John Perrot, Lord President of the Province, decreed a fine of £4 for the making and selling of whiskey, but the English soldiers and administrators displayed a marked interest in the Irish native drink. Fynes Moryson, Mountjoy's secretary, in 1617 declared, "*Irish aqua vitae.....is held the best in the world of that kind.*" Sir Josias Bodley, a soldier who spent nearly 20 years in Ireland, "*It was not without reason we drank usquebaugh for it was the best remedy against the cold of that night and good for dispersing the good vapours of the French wines.*"



Josephs Seawright's, Bridge Street c. 1910

In 1632, the Earl of Cork sent Irish *usqua* to Lord and Lady Coventry in London advising, "*If it please his Lordship next his hart in the morning before breakfast to drink a little of this usquebaugh... it will help to digest all raw humours, expel wind, and keep his inward parts warm all the day.*" It was not only whiskey, with herbs and spices, that was used as a form of preventative medicine, beer and wine were also used. In 1602 Josias Bodley, after a night of drinking wine and whiskey was brought while still in bed next morning "*a certain aromatic of strong ale compounded with sugar and eggs to comfort and strengthen the stomach.*"

While Irish whiskey was praised by the English, opinions of Irish beer and ale were much more mixed. An anonymous Englishman stated in 1623, "*Scarce anywhere out of Dublin, and some few other towns will you meet with any good beer for your money.*" Despite the poor quality of the drink, the profit from selling ale was "so sweet" (more than 6 for 1) that the very aldermen themselves set up half a dozen alehouses apiece. An alehouse licence cost just 3s.6d at that time. Many licensing acts and reforms took place throughout the 1790's and 1830's and, by 1877, a judge described the Irish licensing laws as "*so complex, uncertain, and contradictory that it is difficult to carry them into effect.*"



Michael Canavan with wife Elizabeth holding baby Mary (Morrow): Children from left to right: Vincent (D. 1925) Michael, Owen (at front), Patrick Joseph, Heber and Joby

After 1872 in Ireland there were 14 different types of licences permitting the sale of intoxicating liquors, each having a different set of qualifications and operating conditions. Most commonly held were public-house licence, spirit-grocer licence, wholesale beer-dealers licence and the beer-retailers licence. The spirit-grocer's licence was introduced in the 1780's and not dropped until 1910. A grocer was defined as "*any person dealing in or selling tea, cocoa-nuts, chocolate or pepper*" – once they had a licence they could sell any quantity of spirits, not exceeding two quarts for consumption *off* the premises. These were relatively easy to obtain, while the public-house licence was more difficult. The rules for public house licences were more stringent. The good character of the applicant and the fitness of the premises were taken into account. The police could object and public-house licences had to be renewed each year which meant that they had to be reasonably well run.

On Christmas Day 1828, a group of Protestants and Catholics were drinking in a public house in Poyntzpass, when one of the latter proposed a toast to Daniel O'Connell. A riot broke out and the constabulary were called. Such was the fury of the rioters that the police had to seek shelter in the barracks. When order was restored one man, William Baird, was dead. Four were arrested and one, John Campbell, charged with murder. He was sentenced to '*eighteen months with hard labour*'. It is not clear in which public-house this incident occurred but it is thought to have been adjacent to the barracks, on the corner where the new pharmacy is today.

In the '*Ordnance Survey Memoirs*' of 1837, J. Harvard Williams records that, in Poyntzpass, there were then nine licensed premises. I have been able to identify where eight operated at one time but one remains a mystery and although it is a local traditional story that an unlicensed '*shebeen*' operated at times on the Back Lane, it

is unlikely that J. Harvard Williams included it in his count. There were other public houses here and there around the area, The Crown House between Poyntzpass and Loughbrickland and Porter's in Jerrettspass, for example.

The '*shebeen*' was reputed to deal mainly in illicit poteen. During the nineteenth century illegal poteen-making was widespread in Ireland and there is no reason to think that the local area was any different. Elsewhere the hustle and bustle of the fair day was often used to cover illicit trading in poteen and this probably happened here as well.

A famous local example of poteen-making was recorded by Andrew Halliday in his article on '*Jerrettspass*'. (Before I forget... Number 3) It occurred around 1930, when Robert Kelly, who was sexton of St Mary's Church Drumbanagher, was found to have set up a still in the belfry of the church. Kelly was discovered in the belfry when, having liberally enjoyed some of his own produce, he accidentally rang the bell during the Sunday morning service.



St. Mary's Church Drumbanagher where Robert Kelly had his still.

The fair-day, which was held on the first Saturday of each month, was the busiest and most profitable day of the month for local publicans. The fair dated from 1685 when Sir Toby Poyntz was granted the licence to hold three three-day fairs annually in Acton village. It is a strong tradition recorded by John Quinn in his notes, that the fair moved from Acton to Poyntzpass because of a drink-fuelled faction fight at Acton fair around 1780 between '*the village people*' and '*the country people*' which resulted in the death of a participant. Acton had at least one public house at the time. It is mentioned in John Quinn's poem '*Acton*':

*"And if you want a good strong drink
Call in with Johnny Bell
You'll get it in its purity
Its taste I know full well."*

The Belfast Directory of 1893 lists Lucinda Bell, a publican in Acton. It's not clear when it finally closed but it was



The Fair Day around 1905

probably before the First World War.

At the time the fair was moved from Acton, Poyntzpass, as a village, didn't exist and consisted of a few scattered houses. One of these was said to be an inn at the junction of the Back Lane, which was then the main road, and what is now Meeting Street. The local tradition is that it was in this inn that a tithe-collector named McGeary, was supposed to have been robbed and murdered sometime around 1800.

With the coming of the railway, Poyntzpass fair became a huge event, which was largely responsible for the growth and prosperity of the village. By the beginning of the twentieth century as many as 2,000 cattle thronged the village streets on the fair-day and dealers from all over Ireland and beyond were in attendance. As well as a day for commerce, the fair-day was also a very social occasion, with many people coming into Poyntzpass, selling their wares, seeing people they hadn't seen for a while, and catching up on gossip. A farmer with a few pounds in his pocket often headed to a local pub for a drink to celebrate a good deal. Inevitably this led to an increase in the workload of the local Petty Sessions, which were held on the fair-day. The most numerous cases heard related to drunkenness and the majority of them were of cases of drunkenness on the previous fair-day. In 1909 at Poyntzpass Petty sessions there were more than 50 cases of simple drunkenness, and many other drink-related offences included being drunk and disorderly on the village street, and drunk in charge of a horse and cart!

It seems that by 1874 the number of public houses in the village had reduced to five. They were Henry Hamilton, Bridge Street, Francis Tighe, Bridge Street, Elizabeth Rice, Church Street, Jane Griffith, Church Street and George Mann, Meeting Street, but '*The Belfast Directory*' of 1910 lists seven publicans in the village: Robert Allen, Michael Canavan, (grocer and Publican); Mrs Agnes Mann; F.J. Monaghan; Mrs Rafferty; Joseph Seawright and Mrs Catherine Rice.



Hugh Rafferty's pub

By 1940 the number of public-houses had been reduced to four and the number fell to three when, in 1954, Tommy McVeigh purchased 'The Cyclists' Bar' in Church Street, closed the bar permanently and turned it into a family home. *The Cyclists' Bar* had passed through several hands during its existence. Among the owners in the twentieth century were Patrick McKeown, George McClements, Joseph Seawright, Joseph Hall and finally George Beattie, who sold it in 1954. While the public house has not been open for nearly 60 years the bar counter etc has remained unaltered and the bar window occasionally led strangers to wander into Kathleen McVeigh's home and ask for a drink!



The Railway Bar and Off-Licence

Three public houses remain today. They are 'Ye Olde Dyke Inn' in Meeting Street, 'The Railway Bar' in Railway Street and 'Rice's Hotel' in Church Street.



"The Railway Hotel"

'Ye Olde Dyke Inn', in Meeting Street as it is now known, and where I spent part of my youth growing up, has changed owners several times throughout its history. Originally owned by the Monaghan family, its name changed when Agnes Monaghan married Scotsman, George Mann. George Mann, a native of Aberdeen, was a horticulturist who had worked as head-gardener at

Drumbanagher House, before his marriage. Afterward he set up a successful nursery in the field opposite the Bar, where Hillside Crescent is today. After George died in 1884, the public house was known as 'Mrs Mann's' for nearly 40 years. It was inherited by Agnes Mann's niece Jane Monaghan in 1920 and sold to Joseph Kelly in 1924. Since then it has passed through several hands, including the Kavanagh family, (1927-63).

In 1963 the pub was bought by Owen Murchan, who had returned home after spending ten years in Canada. Owen had no experience of running a public-house and his wife Una had even less. Aidan Meehan, had worked as barman for the previous owner Mick Cavanagh, and Owenie kept him on. Owenie's soon became a very popular country pub with a loyal band of elderly regulars. Back then closing time was 10p.m. and the local police were very active in enforcing the rules. This led to many hilarious incidents with numerous near shaves. Sometimes a friendly constable in the barracks would phone Owenie to warn him that the inspection was being carried out that night by the sergeant. The brief message would simply state, "*The skipper's on the town, better get them out*".



The interior of the former 'Cyclists' Bar', Church Street

In 1969 my father, Owen Trainor, bought the pub from Owen Murchan, and our family moved there. During our years there, my father greatly improved the living quarters and carried out extensive renovations and extensions to the building. A large lounge was added to the rear and a pool-room added to the right of the main door. The patrons formed teams, which competed very successfully in Banbridge District's Darts and Pool Leagues. My father also introduced live music and dancing every weekend in the new lounge, which became very popular, as it was the only venue locally.

A succession of owners followed after my father sold the premises to Seamus Docherty in 1981. 'The Doc' remained there until 1987, when Peter McParland took ownership. However, after just six months, Peter sold the pub to Damien McGibbon. In 1999 it again changed hands, the new owner being a local, Vincent Waddell, whose grandmother Elizabeth Gillen had worked there for Agnes Mann over 100 years earlier. Each owner added something to the old premises. The present owner has carried out further extensive renovations inside and brought the facilities up to date. He has added multiple television screens, so the venue is now very popular for major sporting events.



**Owen Trainor in
"Owenies" 1978**

Over the years the name changed with the change of owner: *Monaghan's, Mrs Mann's, Kavanagh's, Owenie's, Trainor's and Doc's*. The title '*The Old Dyke Inn*' was given to the pub by Peter McParland and refers to the earthwork known as '*The Black Pig's Dyke*' or '*Danes Cast*' which runs a half-mile to the east of the village.



Rice's Hotel today

'*The Railway Bar*' in Railway Street has been in the ownership of the Canavan family for well over 100 years and has retained much of its old-world charm. The earliest name associated with it is that of Francis Tighe. He was succeeded by David McKinney and then by Michael Canavan. Michael Canavan's father, John, was a stonemason by trade. He was a native of Co Galway who had come here in the 1840's, to work at the building of the wall round Close's Estate. The Railway Bar has remained in the family ever since. Until the 1930's Michael Canavan was described as a 'spirit-grocer' but the grocery end of the business had closed sometime earlier. When his son Owen died in 1962, the pub was acquired by Desmond and Bernadette Canavan, the present owners.

The Railway Bar was in the news world-wide in 1998, but for all the wrong reasons. On the evening of March 3rd, while the local pig market was in progress, masked men entered the bar and opened fire indiscriminately on the customers, killing friends Philip Allen and Damien Trainor and wounding others. But for the action of Mrs Bernadette Canavan, in switching off the lights, the atrocity might have been even worse.

What is now known as *Rice's Hotel*, bar and restaurant, dates back to the establishment of the village, for it is said

to have been established in 1798. The ownership of the business passed down through several generations of the Rice family, the name changing when Catherine Rice married Sam Hudson near the beginning of the twentieth century, when it was called the '*Commercial Hotel*'. A disastrous fire in 1918 virtually destroyed the building and led to a maid, Margaret Harvey, being seriously injured when she jumped from an upstairs window.

On the death of his mother Catherine in 1952, the pub passed to Gerry Hudson. Gerry did not run the business himself but leased it to several people, including Hughie Quinn from Portadown, a Mr Topley from Tandragee and local man Billy Thomas.



**John Trainer at the
door of the 'Old Dyke
Inn'**

For several years in the 1970's and 1980's the pub was virtually closed down, opening only briefly to preserve the licence. However, a change in licensing laws meant that the licence would be lost if the pub wasn't open, so this led firstly to Gerry's son,

Desmond Hudson opening in 1982, for a time, and then his brother Michael running the business from 1983 until 2001. Gerald Hudson then took over and carried out extensive renovations before selling to Darren and Cathy Quinn. The Quinns also renovated and added a restaurant upstairs, which they ran themselves for a few years, before moving back to the U.S. The bar and very popular restaurant has been leased by brothers Ronan and Gavin Walsh, since 2007.

Over the years there have been changes to many aspects of life in the village. The monthly fair, once the village's busiest day, is but a distant memory, many village shops have gone and others have changed hands. But while they too have changed much over the years, the local pubs still remain popular meeting places, where locals can socialise from time to time, enjoy a '*bit of crack*' and, if so inclined, enjoy an occasional '*drop of the hard stuff*'.



Mrs Bernadette Canavan in the 'Railway Bar'