

'Are ye fer hiring?'

By John Campbell

In an earlier copy of "Before I forget ..." we recorded memories of Poyntzpass Fair Day as recalled by Minnie and Sara Savage. In a later issue a poem by Sara Savage depicted scenes at a different type of fair - the hiring fair. The poem entitled 'Hiring Day' was inspired by Sara's recollections of the sad scenes at Newry's Edward Street Railway Station, as young boys and girls, who had been hired at the hiring fair held that day in the town, said a tearful goodbye to their parents. They were going off for six months to work for farmers "down the country" as many of them described it.

Fairs and markets have always been important meeting places and even today, the weekly Newry Market, in existence from the early seventeenth century, continues as a place where people from town and country meet their friends. In their original form, fairs were places where laws were laid down and it is said that hiring fairs owe their origin to attempts to organise the supply of labour and to fix wages during the shortage of labour created by the Black Death in the fourteenth century. A law known as the 'Statute of Labourers' required magistrates to fix wages for labourers and to make the rates known to all concerned. It was decreed that this should take place on 1st May

and, in the autumn, at what was called the 'Statute Sessions'.

A notice in a Newry newspaper in 1904, records that a Hiring Fair was held in Newry on 19th May that year when the wages arranged for six months were,

'Ploughman £10 -£10.10; Farm Hands £9 - £9.10; Strong Hands £5 -£6; Little Fellows for light work £4.5 - £4.15; Strong Young Women with general knowledge £7-£8; Young General House Servants £6-£7; Little Girls £4-£4.10.'

Most of the people I spoke to were unaware of a fixed rate for six months work. I heard the going rate described as £4 - £5 for the half year and, if you were lucky, you got your washing done.

Hiring fairs have often been described as open-air labour exchanges; the official title was 'Agricultural Labour Markets.' There were at one time as many as 80 Hiring Fairs held in Ulster. They were usually held in places where there was a combination of demand for labour by farmers living on sizeable farms and a supply of labour available from families living in poor, mostly rural, circumstances.

For example hiring fairs were held in Newry, Newtownhamilton and Dundalk where young people from South Armagh would offer themselves for hire to farmers from areas where



Hughie Ferris outside his home, the gatelodge, Drumbanagher.



Mrs Kitty Ferris. She met her husband while hired in Drumaness

there was good farming land in Counties Down and Meath. A neighbour of ours in Drumbanagher, Kitty Ferris, who came originally from Mullaghbawn, was hired in the Ballynahinch area where she met her husband, Hugh, a native of Drumaness. At Strabane in County Tyrone large numbers of young people from Donegal attended for hire. I referred earlier to sessions held on 1st May to fix wages but in general hiring fairs were held on 12th May – “Old May Day” – and on 12th November – “Old Hallow E'en”. The May fair was by far the largest, coming at the start of the busy time on farms.

Tommy Crilly told me there were three hiring days in Newry which he described as, “*coming home Monday, hiring Monday, and runaway Monday.*” As far as I can ascertain Newry was the only fair where those hired, and their employers, had an opportunity on the third Monday to cancel the contract and start again if either found the arrangements unsatisfactory. Although servant boys or girls might have agreed to continue working for the same employer for a further six months, they would still attend the Hiring Fair. Many took pride in the fact that their reputation was so good that they never again had to “*stand in a hiring fair.*” Others took pride in having survived a tough six months. As the Rev. Marshall’s poem ‘Sara Ann’ recalls,



Tommy Crilly

“Sure ye min the girl fer hiring that went shouting thru the fair

‘I wuntered in wee Robert’s I can summer anywhere!’”

There is some evidence that hiring fairs were held as early as the 1730s but the peak period for them was from the mid 1800s until the early part of the twentieth century. The employment on offer was temporary service for six months or a term, as it was known. The Newry fair was in Castle Street on open ground opposite the Butter Market.

By today’s standards it would be easy to form the general conclusion that people hired out to farmers under these conditions were little better than slaves and indeed, a lot of them were treated very badly. However it must be remembered that times were tough for everyone including many of the farmers. Farmers who hired servants for six months came in the middle range. They were not big enough to afford permanent workers and, in some cases, enjoyed conditions little better than their servants. This was particularly true in the case of farmers’ sons sometimes working for nothing for a widowed mother and even more so in respect of a son’s wife who had moved in to live with her in-laws. These young women often appreciated the harshness of the servant’s life and on occasions would show sympathy and kindness towards them.

In the 1920s and 30s young boys and girls were often sent out to the hiring fair to earn some money to help support the rest of the family at home. They would have been used to little better conditions had they remained at home. Indeed in some cases, although not many, they were better cared for in their place of employment than at home. There are on the one hand many examples of ill-treatment of servants on some farms where the animals were treated better than the young people hired out. But there are also examples of acts of kindness shown to servants who came from a different culture, practised a different religion in a lot of cases, and even sometimes spoke a different language. Fair and decent employers would have had their servants with them for many years and were well known in the hiring fair. Young people keen to hire with such well-



Edward Street Station (Photo Des Fitzgerald)

respected farmers would approach them to offer their services. A visitor to Newry Hiring Fair spoke of the farmers wearing bowler hats, sports jackets and leggings and speaking in a strange accent.

There were different levels of status among the servants and the wages fixed at Newry Hiring Fair in 1904 reflected the range of duties and the values placed upon them. Ploughmen were the best paid and, in some cases, enjoyed the best living conditions. They would invariably be given accommodation in the house, whereas other male servants might have to share with the animals.

Sara Savage described in her poem the sad scenes at Edward Street Station in Newry where parents who had accompanied their children to the fair bade them farewell. Not all children had the company of their parents. Many travelled to the fair with their brothers and sisters, perhaps walking long distances in their bare feet or, if they were lucky, getting a lift in a neighbour's cart. The poet and novelist Patrick Magill, who travelled from Donegal to Strabane Hiring Fair, described leaving home at fourteen years of age. *"I stopped for a moment at the bend of the road. My father was standing at the door waving his*

hand. My mother rubbed her eyes with the corner of her apron - I thought she was crying." Poyntzpass-man Hugh Downey's parents didn't accompany him to Newry Hiring Fair. He told me they did not know he was going! Hugh was thirteen when he got a lift to Newry with Peter Gribben on the third hiring day in November. That was in 1924 and Hugh got himself hired on the recommendation of neighbours Charlie Loye and Jemmy Lennon. He was hired by a Mrs Murray and her son Cuthbert, of



Hugh Downey

Katesbridge. He was taken in to 'an eatin' house' and given a Paris bun and a cup of tea, before setting off home with them in their pony and trap. Some of the children were as young as ten when they first went out to hire. The late Harry McClory was hired twice when he was about 14 or 15 years of age. He was hired to two different farmers in the Dromore area. He was very unhappy and homesick.



Harry McClory

Children from Donegal who arrived in Strabane Hiring Fair were described as wide-eyed with fright and clinging to each other as they made their way to the market place.

Bridget Campbell from Forkhill told me about walking from there to Newry Hiring Fair accompanied by her mother. She was thirteen and had never been to Newry before. It was 17th May 1912. A farmer named McCammon from Donacloney hired Bridget for six months.

There are many recorded descriptions of the scene as young people were bargained for in much the same way as a deal was struck for the sale or purchase of an animal. A farmer would approach a young man or woman with the question "Are ye fer hirin'?" He and his wife, or perhaps his mother, would look over the boy or girl and question them about what they could do. For example "Can you milk? - Can you plough? - Are you an early riser?" Bridget Campbell told me she was asked if she could bake, milk and could she sing as it was believed that if a milker sang to the cow it would increase the yield.

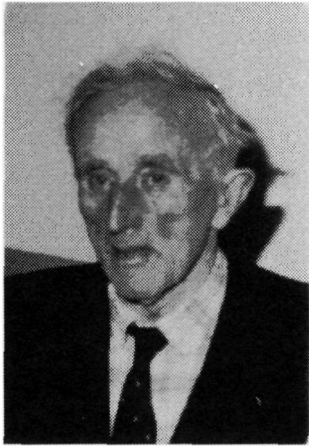
If the servant met all the farmer's requirements

then the haggling about wages began. Obviously those accompanied by their parents had some help in securing a fair wage but one can imagine the difficulty of young timid country children bargaining with a worldly farmer anxious to get labour as cheap as possible. Children for hire usually carried a small bundle of clothing and perhaps a pair of boots and when the deal was made the bundle was handed over to the farmer who gave the servant a small amount of money usually from a shilling (5p) to two and sixpence (12p). This was described as 'Earnest Money' - supposedly from the Greek word for a pledge or the Latin Arrabo meaning 'earning money'. There is a story told about an enterprising young fellow who spent hiring day making up bundles of rags in an entry in Newry. He then exchanged them with farmers for 'Earnest Money'.

Nearly everyone I spoke to referred to that sad journey at the end of the hiring day. Children, for that's what most of them were, bade tearful goodbye to their parents and the rest of their family and were now completely under the control of the farmer for the next six months. From Newry a large number made the journey by train, crammed into a third class carriage - the first and second class carriages were kept locked. They would arrive at the farm late in the evening and were taken out immediately to be shown their duties. Throughout their hired days many young children, suffering from loneliness and homesickness, often cried themselves to sleep.

Over seventy years ago Tommy Crilly from Forkhill was hired at Dundalk Hiring Fair and received two shillings and sixpence earnest money. Tommy had gone to Dundalk with his mother - he remembers that she sold two bullocks for £2.10s He started work at 6 o'clock in the morning when he milked and cleaned out the byre before breakfast.

On wet days he brought the horse in and dried it and was sent out in the rain again himself to continue working. Tommy told me he tried to dry his clothes at night by putting them under him as he slept. The horse got an hour for its dinner but he got only half an hour and was expected to help out with churning and other duties for the other half-hour. He didn't get



Mickey Crilly

home during the six months and was expected to make his own arrangements to get his washing done. Tommy's brother, Mickey, was hired out for light farm work with a woman in County Louth who kept hens. When he went there Mickey told me *"the hens knew more about me than I knew about hens!"*

When Owen Murchan's mother died in 1942 - his father had died 7 years earlier - Owen travelled from his home in Mullaghbawn to the May Hiring Fair in Newry. He was hired by Dawson Jones to work on his farm at Scarva for £24 for the six month term. He lived in the house and had his meals with the family. Although his employer wanted him to stay on in November Owen thought he would like a change and he went back to the fair. He was hired to work on a dairy farm near Lisburn for about the same money. However the conditions were much different. Sleeping accommodation was out on a loft and he had to get up at 5 o'clock every morning to deliver milk around the area including a number of army camps. Owen stayed a week and on 'runaway Thursday' he returned to Newry Fair. Dawson Jones was also at the fair as the replacement he had hired had proved unsuitable and Owen returned with him to Scarva. He worked from about 8 o'clock in the morning to 8 at night. He remembers a number of young fellows from his Mullaghbawn home working in the area including Mick Tierney and Peter Murphy and



Owen Murchan

they would meet up on Sundays at Tandragee chapel. Peter worked for Willie Anderson near Scarva Locks and eventually Owen replaced him there and went on to work for Andersons for between 8 and 9 years.

Pat Turley from Acton, like his father before him, was hired out at Newry Hiring Fair. He went to the Fair with his father and was hired to a Thomas Clokey of The Horse Park, Lisburn. That was in 1937 or 1938 and Pat told me that after hiring he returned home and then cycled to Lisburn 2 or 3 days later. He was 15 or 16 and was paid £14.00 for the half year. The main activity of the farm was market gardening and Pat tied bundles of rhubarb for Belfast market starting work at 6.00am. Pat's accommodation was in the old farmhouse and he cycled home some weekends to the family home at Dinaharra, Markethill. There was a chapel - Maghergall - at the end of the lane, which he attended on Sundays when he stayed over.

Most servant boys and girls had to get some local woman to do their washing for them. Hugh Downey told me he paid three shillings and sixpence to get his clothes washed by a neighbour in Katesbridge, Sarah Dalzell. As in Tommy Crilly's experience, most hired servants were expected to start work at 6 o'clock and the milking and yard work was usually done before breakfast.

One servant boy being called at half past five in the morning was told by the farmer that it was raining again to which the sleepy boy muttered,

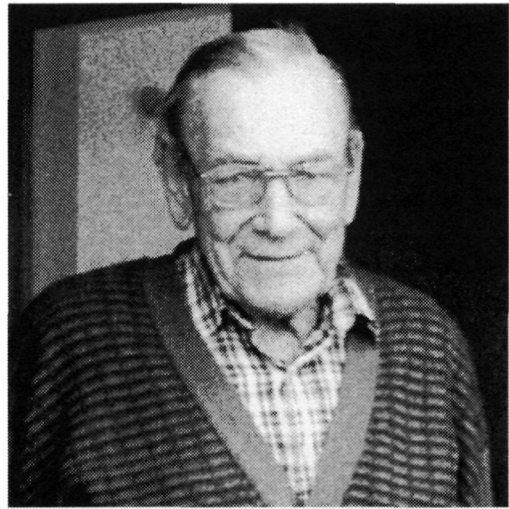


Pat Turley

"The more rain, the more rest". "What was that you said?" shouted the farmer. *" I said, 'The more rain the more grass'"*. Breakfast could consist of porridge and buttermilk with perhaps tea and a little bread and butter. On some farms tea was considered a luxury reserved for Sunday evenings only.

Artie O'Hare told me that Charlie Small from Jerrettspass talked about *"a mug of tay and a jockey on the top"* – the 'jockey' was a slice, or finger, of wheaten bread. Another servant boy described getting *"two harrow pins of soda bread for breakfast."* The hired boy or girl on the better farms might have got an egg for breakfast. I was told of a farm in County Down where one egg was divided between two servant men. In the same district servants hired to a brother and sister were given their breakfast in the scullery whilst their employers took theirs in the 'front room'. The servants quickly noticed that the brother would cough when taking the top of his egg in an attempt to conceal the fact that they were having eggs for breakfast. In that house porridge was served in the evening.

Hungry hired children would sometimes eat some of the food they were preparing for the animals or get a drink of milk when milking. Although the farmer might have killed a pig and have the bacon hung up for curing the servants rarely got any of it. The expression "praties and point" refers to the farmhand putting a potato on his fork and pointing at the bacon! That was as



Artie O'Hare

close as he got to it. I was told about a farmer's wife who buttered the bread for the servants with her finger to discourage them from eating too much. The same woman didn't trust the servant girls with the soap so she soaped the clothes and then took the soap away.

Most former hired servants I spoke to told me they got their meals at a separate table from the farmer and his family and in a lot of cases they were usually fed in the scullery. Young girls who did housework were not allowed to use the front door and one told me the only time she was at the front door was when answering it as part of her duties, or when she scrubbed the front step.

There were, of course, exceptions to this rather bleak portrayal of life for the hired servants. I was told about a young Catholic boy, Hugh Sands, who was hired out to a Protestant farmer in County Down. Hugh told the farmer that he was thinking of becoming a priest. The farmer assisted the young man financially in pursuing his vocation and, I was told by some of the farmer's relations, that the room in the house where the young man stayed was referred to as *"Father Hugh's room"*. Pat Judge told me about a number of servant boys who were encouraged to keep some stock of their own on their employers land, and eventually, with the help of their employer, who went guarantor, they were able to buy land and become farmers themselves.



Pat Judge

For a lot of male servants the sleeping accommodation was little better than that provided for the animals and, indeed, many shared the outhouses with the livestock. Normally, servant girls lived in the house. The outhouses were damp and draughty often with leaking roofs. An old man told me that in the winter he often woke up with the bed coverings stiff with frost. In the same area in County Down he told me about a man called Daly who



James McCreesh with granddaughter Eileen

died on the loft of the farmhouse from pneumonia.

At Mass in Barr Chapel on the Sunday after the May hiring day locals looked out for new faces among the congregation and for those returning to work in the area for another term. Young people hired locally in that community attended the local dances and in some cases provide the music. Artie O'Hare told me about two great fiddle players Packy Joe McKeown and Hughie Taggart, both hired in the area, who played for dances in O'Hare's barn. Some servant boys and girls met their future husbands or wives and settled in the area. James McCreesh from Forkhill was hired out to a local farmer called McAnuff where he met his wife, Sarah Ann Sands. They married and went to live at the lock house at Knockanarney. Another man known as Paddy 'the blouse' Murphy who came from South Armagh was hired with Joe Ferris of Jerrettspass. He remained there the rest of his days and is buried in Lissummon graveyard.

At the end of the six-month term some farmers made deductions for breakage's. Tony Bennett told me about an incident involving his brother Johnny. On the last morning of his term Johnny was sent out to brush the yard with an old brush with a rotten shaft. When the shaft broke the farmer deducted £1 from his six month's wages of £7.

Many servants would have obtained advances to



Sarah McCreesh



Tony Bennett

send home or buy a pair of boots and had little to collect on their last day.

The Newry Reporter dated 21st May 1904 contained the following description of Newry Hiring Fair -

Thursday last was the third May half-yearly hiring fair in Newry, and the country folks gathered into town in hundreds to enjoy one of the few day's leisure the toil of the agricultural labourer allows. All day they had meandered about, spending the savings of the last six months - wisely in cases, foolishly in others - and making new bargains. Then came homegoing, and Edward Street Railway Station, in the afternoon at a few minutes after four o'clock, was the scene of much fun and confusion. Outside was a throng of lads and lasses making for the train, en route to the new place. Swains clung round buxom lasses, as they led them blushing along; while the old folks counselled the youngster, who was perhaps hired for the first time, and whose perspective in life was to himself in rosy enough hue. Nearly every-one carried a red handkerchief, in which were their worldly possessions. Two stout porters stood at the gate passing them in and checking the tickets. Many were the disputes regarding the right of admission of friends to the platform, and many were the subterfuges used to gain entrance. But the platform was packed,

and with such a crowd as only a hiring fair can produce. Girls who were as gay as peacocks in the morning with the bright tawdry so beloved, were now tired and decidedly uncomfortable-looking. Lads from fifteen to twenty-three hung about with that wearied expression which bad intoxicants generally produce. Men up to ninety were little better, and one felt pity as one glanced at the horny, toil-worn hands, the heavy boots, and the rough clothes. Old motherly-women went hither and thither looking for bairns lost in the crowd, who had evidently been hired away and whom they were seeing off. A merry hum of conversation continued incessantly. But soon all were securely packed in the carriages, the engine began to move, a few more handshakes and waving of handkerchiefs, and the train was gone.

Two World Wars hastened the end of the hiring fairs and by the end of the second they were almost over as a means of securing employment. Payment of unemployment benefit provided labourers with a degree of independence and farmers could engage workers for shorter periods and then pay them off. Children were also required to attend school to a minimum age. Where many of us live today may well have been determined by the outcome of a journey to a hiring fair by some of our ancestors -- there were few other opportunities to travel in those days. However no one regrets the passing of the hiring fairs.



Sara Savage

“The Hirin’ Fair”

I couldn’t look behind me
 As I left the cottage door —
 It was partin’ with wee ones
 That left my heart so sore.

My mother took my bundle,
 We were for the Hirin’ Fair
 An’ the crowd was bravely gathered
 Agin’ we landed there.

We heard a lot of bargainin’
 As we stood about till late
 ‘Twas for some a ready market
 While others be to wait.

Then a man spoke up fornenest us
 As he eyed me up an’ down —
 “Is the wee lass out for hirin’
 Or just to see the Town?”

“A widow’s chile,” says mother,
 “Sure she be to go an earn
 An’ the more she ‘s wee, she ‘s willin’
 An won’t be hard to learn.”

An’ soon the wage was settled
 An’ the earnest in my han’
 Says the master “Now it’s home time,
 We’ll make it as we can.”

My mother was beside me
 As we journied through the throng,
 Then she says “I be to leave you,
 An’ don’t be thinkin’ long.”

Her shawl my eye could follie’
 On the journey as before
 Then with turnin’ for the station
 Sure I seen her plaid no more.

There’s many a change since them times
 For it’s three score years come May,
 But I never feeled as lonesome
 As on that Hirin’ day.

SARAH SAVAGE