

“Tourists and Evacuees”

by M. J. WADDELL



Acton Lake

FROM the early years of this century up to the outbreak of World War II, a sizeable number of visitors came to holiday in the Poyntzpass area each year. They came largely from the North of England and were generally family groups who returned year after year to spend two or three weeks around Poyntzpass. They stayed at first in the five hotels the village boasted at that time but later many stayed in farmhouses all around the countryside.

What brought these visitors each year? They were the products of the Industrial Revolution in England. A couple of generations back their forefathers had played cricket on the village greens, fished the rivers, hunted and followed outdoor pursuits. Then came the factories. The small rural villages became absorbed into larger population units which grew into cities and industrial towns—Manchester, Bolton, Blackburn, Preston. The old saying that “you can take the man out of the country, but you can’t take the country out of the man” has a lot of truth in it. The love of village life, of woods, of green fields, the love of nature and old world charm was still with these people and this they found in abundance around Poyntzpass in the 1920’s and 1930’s.

On looking back to my own youth I am astounded at the changes that have taken place—the changes in the way of life and the destruction of the beauties of God’s creation.

I was born and brought up in a lockhouse on the banks of the lovely waterway, the Newry Canal which has been allowed to fall into decay. My memories of the boats and the boatmen are still very vivid. Then the horse was king on the farm, now tractors and combines reign. No longer can we see a man with a pair of horses with bells ringing on their collars ploughing or harrowing. Today’s young people probably never heard of a grubber or a swing plough. The steam engines on the railway and the threshing mill are relics of the past. — What memories of threshing!

During summer the sounds of mowing machines were ever present. The seed hay and corn harvest was tied in sheaves by the farmer, his family often helped out by their neighbours. The sheaves were “stooked”, the loose hay shaken out, turned until dry and then built into “cocks”, all done with pitchforks. Hay in meadows along the canal was “lapped”, and taken across the canal on a punt, a flat bottomed boat. During a wet summer when the meadows were flooded the hay which had been “lapped” would float until the water subsided. Cocks of hay were moved using a “needle”, a long iron bar which was pushed through the bottom of the cock of hay with a rope over the top, allowing it to be pulled by a horse.

While all these activities were in progress the air was full of the sounds of the cornrake, the cuckoo, the lark, the yellow hammer, the goldfinch, the chaffinch and the buzzing of bees. Swans

and moorhens were plentiful on the canal with the odd kingfisher skimming along. Otters were a common sight.

The countryside was filled with the aroma of roses, honeysuckle and new mown hay.

The farming way of life has changed so much. Then most farms had milk cows, stores, calves, horses, pigs, a few sheep, goats, turkeys, geese, ducks and hens. The people had great affection for their animals and had pet names for them, like "Bob" for a horse and "Daisy" or "Betty" for a cow. When an animal had to be sold there were mixed feelings, it was like parting with an old friend.

Most homes were self sufficient, producing milk, butter, potatoes, eggs, vegetables and their own bread. Churning was a weekly chore for the farmer's wife. Many farmers also kept pigs to provide bacon and ham. A large bag of flour (1 cwt.) was kept in the kitchen. Meal was ground at "The Miller" Hanna's, Ballydougherty — there were no breadmen in those days in country areas. A typical order to Mr. Eddie Griffith's grocers would have included, meal, 'Clarendo', flour, tea, sugar and paraffin oil. Sunlight soap was needed for washing clothes and carbolic for washing oneself.

Homes were lit with candles and oil lamps for there was no rural electricity. The big leap forward came with the "Aladdin" and "Tilley" lamps in the 1930's.

The houses and gate pillars were whitewashed every spring and the tops of the pillars were tarred. This was done in the interests of hygiene. Most doors and half doors were painted "Spanish brown" a favourite colour of the day.

So it was into this environment that the English visitors came — a far cry from Manchester or Bolton.

Many of the menfolk were anglers and there were many inviting waters for them to practice their craft. The fishing was very good in the Newry Canal, with pike, perch, rudd, bream and eel. Fishing was also popular in Acton Lake, McCourt's Lake, in Marlacoo and Shaws' Lake.

In the year 1912 the Manchester anglers fished the final of their competition at Acton Lake. A

21 lb. pike was caught and this fish is still on display in a show case in a Manchester pub.

Today there are 6 million anglers in the Manchester, Liverpool, Blackburn and Bolton area — what potential for tourism has been undeveloped all these years.

In the 1930's the visitors stayed in farmhouses and guesthouses. There were annual visitors to Littles "of the Lough" (Lisnabrague), Shanks' (Loughadian), Rice's Hotel (Church Street), Murphy's Temperance Hotel (Church Street) and Jenny Griffith's (William Street). Regular visitors still remembered were the Shelley family from Salford, the Whiteheads, Hindcliffes, Fairhursts and the Smethers.

When accommodation was booked out menfolk often slept outside in tents and womenfolk in the house.

From the 'Pass Bridge Jemmy Grimes used to row the anglers and their wives and children to Acton Lake. The fare was six-pence. When the day's fishing was finished and the evening meal was over and the Guinness was tasted, Barn Dances were held and a "good time was had by all."

The mention of the barn dances brings to my memory music of the early 30's, such as:

Bing Crosby who was just coming into prominence.

Harry Lauder, popular music-hall entertainer.

Arthur Tracey, "The Street Singer."

George Formby, "If you could see."

John McCormack, tenor, he was considered a little highbrow.

Richard Hayward, singer, and

Jimmy O'Dea, a comedian were becoming very popular.

Irish Songs on the go were:—

"Cod Liver Oil,"

"Sweet Kitty Wells,"

"Flower of Sweet Strabane," and

"Mountain Dew".

In Poyntzpass at that time entertainments included the Tennis Club which flourished where the County Primary School now stands. Handball, skittles and marbles were favourite pastimes. Fairday was the First Saturday of every month.

The late Bob Whiteside and myself often gave Concerts in Ceilidhe Houses with a wind-up gramophone in Aughtantaraghan and Drum-banagher.



Mrs. May Fairhurst from Manchester (right) with Elizabeth and Mary Waddell

The one family of visitors that I knew so well were the Fairhursts who came from Manchester. Old Mr. Fairhurst loved to fish at our locks, so his wife May and my mother became great friends. His three sons were around my age and we had great times together. All of us helped with the harvest at Jemmy Liggett's and the big highlight for them was the tea brought out to the fields.

The youngest boy Richard took a great fancy to our goat. He enjoyed trying to milk her, but I don't think the goat enjoyed the operation just as much! This family stayed in Murphy's, Church Street.

An old character Pat, who was a servant man in Frank Monaghan's fished every night at our locks. He and Mr. Fairhurst became very friendly. One night the old fella was in very bad form and Mr. Fairhurst asked him what happened to him. He said, "I got an awful "founder" last night I went to the Pass and got "full". On the way home I slept all night in Eiver Monaghan's meadow and the gate was lying open!"

After the war, money became more plentiful and modernisation of the houses took place in a big

way. Old photographs, letters, receipts, etc., were discarded or burnt. During the renovations old furniture such as dressers, iron beds, sofas, "settle beds" and fan bellows were thrown out and new glossy hardboard stuff was put in their place. Such was progress. What would all these old world items not be worth in the Antique Market today?

Just a passing thought on the dress and the hair style of the 30's. Mary Quant would have been burnt at the stake with her Mini-skirt, make-up and modern hair styles. One of the hair styles of the day was hair in the "Listening in" style. The hair was plaited into circles around the ears, looking like ear phones. Ladies having their hair "bobbed" (cut short) were frowned upon, in fact, it was damned nearly a Mortal Sin!

I am of the opinion that the warmth of the people, the old World charm and the unspoilt environment of the area in the 30's brought these folk to holiday with us each year.

Alas Adolf Hitler and the events of the World War 2 changed everything. However, Hitler was directly responsible for another influx of visitors to the area in 1941 — the evacuees from Belfast.

EVACUEES

On the night of 15/16 April, 1941, Easter Tuesday, Belfast was hit by German bombers. I remember cycling home from a dance in Newry Town Hall, and watching the red sky in the North. In those days we did not have a news bulletin every hour, but I knew that some trouble was happening as I heard the dull sound of German planes.

From Jonathan Barben and Stephen Conlin's book "Belfast 1000 Years", it was reckoned that 203 tons of bombs and 800 Fire Bombs were dropped. The first bombs to drop hit the Telephone Exchange and contact with Britain was cut off. It was reckoned that a bomb exploded every minute and that 140 fires were raging at 1.30 a.m. J. C. McDermott, the then Minister of Public Security, phoned De Valeria and Cardinal MacRory asking for urgent help and 13 Fire Engines from Dublin, Dunlaoghaire, Drogheda and Dundalk sped North. The Rev. Eric Gallaher, Minister of Woodvale Methodist Church helped



Moody's Lockhouse and Poyntzpass Station



Ducks on the Canal in the 1930's

to dig out the bodies of 14 of his congregation. Over Crumlin Road lorries were piled high with bodies and severed limbs. Over 200 bodies were laid out in St. George's Market, only half were ever identified. Over 745 people were dead, 430 injured. No other City except London suffered so much in one night.

6,000 people arrived in Dublin on the following days. 10's of thousands left the City for the countryside. 40,000 people had to be put up in Rest Centres.

One very, very sad precaution had to be taken, all the dangerous animals in Belle Vue Zoo had to be destroyed. The head keeper stood with tears in his eyes.

Wednesday was the day that thousands were exacuated from the city, on that Wednesday the people of Poyntzpass, Lissummon, Drumbanagher and surrounding areas rose to the occasion and took scared and desolate people into their homes. Meals and beds were provided in the Legion Hall. Bits and pieces of furniture and treasured possessions were piled high on cars and lorries. The Government offered a plan that as many people as possible should evacuate to quiet country areas and the sum of 5/- per week was given to householders who would take in an evacuee.

A McNally family, Stella, Ann and Kathleen stayed with the late Sarah Bradley in Lisnalee. Quite recently these people came back on a visit to the area. A family of Stewarts stayed with Alice Boyle in Leish. Some of this family married locally and are now living in the Camlough area. A Bradley family stayed in O'Hagans. A family of Morrisons and a family of Cummins also came to the area.

Coming from the hustle and bustle of city life to a quite rural community was a very disturbing experience for a while, yet, all were very thankful to be alive.

As I have stated the Legion Hall was made available, meals and beds were provided.

Eleven people were housed in Charlie Fisher's. Eleven was the number agreed with authorities but a couple of days later the late John Craig decided to have a head count and he discovered



Charlie Fisher's house which accommodated at least 21

that there were at least twenty-one. One old lady styled herself as "Orange Bella". John Craig gave this old lady a shilling to get him a bottle of Guinness. When she returned home she had the bottle but no Guinness and told John that the bottle had burst! The last one to leave Charlie Fisher's was a Mrs. Johnston. Johnny Rafferty also took in a family.

Some of the people who came remained with us for a long time—Mrs. Curry, Mrs. Ritchie. Mrs. Curry eventually came to reside in the house where Mrs. Annie McSherry now lives. Some stayed with Mrs. McCreesh in Monclone, some in Acton cottage (now demolished) and some in Acton House. In fact in trying to research this I found that refugees were taken into houses everywhere, it wasn't possible to list them all.

As part of the wartime precautions the Village had its own Civil Defence Unit, operated from Clark's in the "far Pass." As an Air Raid precaution all windows had to be covered at night, known to all as the "blackout". Police would knock a door if they saw a glimmer of light. Everyone was issued with Gasmasks. Fire drills were held in Acton by the Home Guard and the Army had bases at Best's, Drumbanagher and Dromantine.

On trying to research some information about the 'blitz' in Belfast and the evacuees, I thought I could easily get reports from local papers, "The Newry Reporter", "The Banbridge Chronicle", "The Newry Telegraph", etc. Mr. Joe Canning gave me every facility to go through the papers for the weeks following but nothing of any significance could I find and then it dawned on me why,—detailed news was blacked out for security

reasons. Lord Haw Haw was on the air each night broadcasting from Germany and it was most disturbing to the authorities how often he mentioned local places one of them being Marlacoo Lake. Some slogans of the day were, "careless talk cost lives" and "keep it under your hat" another was "dig for victory", urging the population to produce their own food.



Grazing "the long acre" near the "Crack Bridge"



Railway Street,
Poyntzpass
around 1930

Railway Street, Poyntzpass