

## SAILORTOWN

Sailortown was a unique community – Belfast's first waterfront village.

The marshy bogland was known as **Point's Fields**. The area was drained and piled (wooden poles hammered into the soil) to bear the weight of the rows of terraced housing built for families now settling in this waterfront village settlement.

**Great George's Street** was laid down in 19th century - **wide**, expansive and housing the middle classes. Henry Street, Earl Street, Dock Street and Ship Street were similar.

Sea Captains, Pilots, Ship Chandlers and Merchants lived in bigger houses.

Trafalgar Street, North Thomas Street, Fleet Street and New Andrew Street were **narrow** streets.

**Barrow Square** was named after a steamship company. Its passenger vessels docked on nearby Albert Dock.

After **1845** buildings increased in number - dock warehouses, linen mills, factories, a large fire station, a hotel, boarding houses, shops, businesses, pubs, cinemas and boxing clubs.

The **York Road railway station** was nearby and transported into Sailortown many country people trying to escape Famine distress. The railway arrived in **1848**. It was on the corner of Whitla Street and York Street.

We know that, at first, local men resented the influx of culchies - all looking for work.

In **1870** there were 47 houses in Pilot Street.

**St Joseph's Church** was built in 1872 on Prince's Dock Street. It is often called 'the chapel on the quays'. Much later St Joseph's Church was likened to New York's St Patrick's Cathedral - dwarfed by skyscrapers.

For some, Sailortown is bordered by Henry Street, York Street and Whitla Street dock gates.

**Upper Sailortown**, in one opinion, was between Nelson Street and York Street - and predominantly Protestant.

Billy McIlroy was a local historian from Nelson Street. He joined the Merchant Navy. He felt that **Nelson Street created a boundary**. Catholics were to the East and Protestants were to the West. He records that for some locals the West did NOT constitute 'Sailortown'. There was division but crossovers existed in some bookies and in some pubs like Earl Clipper pub.

**Garmoyle Street** is a main arterial road into Sailortown. Before demolition started – 1969-1975 approximately - there were about 5,000 people living in Sailortown. There were local families - men working on the seas and in the docks. There were European sailors particularly from around the **Baltic Sea**.

There were some **Indian** and **Chinese** sailors. The mix was unique - locals could engage with people from all around the world - and all without travel.

Men went to sea - some aged only 14. Women worked in linen mills or in the Gallaher's tobacco factory. Houses were often damp, cramped and reliant on an open fire for cooking, heat and bathing. Toilets were in the yard.

The main streets in Sailortown were Garmoyle Street, Pilot Street, Dock Street, Princes Dock Street, Nelson Street and Short Street. Garmoyle Street was called after the Pool of Garmoyle in Belfast Lough.

AJ O'Rawe, a carter, lived at number 2 Nelson Street. He took part in the 1907 Belfast Dock Strike.

**Earl Street** had five or six corner shops and two chip shops. There was a murder in Earl Street in 1942. It happened in one of the two air raid shelters on the street. After falling out with a local man an American soldier stabbed the local to death and was arrested very soon afterwards.

New Andrew Street, New Dock Street and Nelson Street all but vanished when the **new modern fire station** was built around 1970. The new fire station had to be built as close to the Belfast Harbour estate as possible. The new fire station represented the start of fullscale demolition and dispersal of the Sailortown community. The community were not adequately involved in this decision making.

**Redevelopment meant relocation to New Lodge area, North Belfast suburbs and Shore Crescent adjacent to Greencastle. The early seventies displaced over 1,000 families and 300 businesses. Only three houses remain – round the corner from McKenna’s pub.**

Because the area was controlled by the Harbour Commission and the City Council they made decisions about the future of Sailortown land. Some area was leased to Clanmil Housing Association.

The **Dockers’ Club** on Pilot Street opened in **1978**. Here they organised boxing leagues, acting tuition and charity fund raising. Sailortown people returned to Sailortown to talk about their childhood memories.

**Sailortown Cultural and Historical Society** was set up in October 1999.

In **2006** S.H.I.P. was formed - **Shared History Interpretative Project** - and the impressive **mural** on Pilot Street was created about 2015. The project organisers created an informative booklet about the **mural**. Then in 2017 the booklet became high quality storyboards placed below the **mural**. This is an excellent display of the Sailortown Story.

Locals like Denis Smyth, Billy McIlroy and Brian Quinn have worked to gather up Sailortown people and record their childhood memories.

## **SAILORTOWN REGENERATION GROUP**

The Catholic Church closed St Joseph’s Church in **1999**. The building was stripped of pulpit, pews, congregation records - then electricity - and finally - the doors locked.

The Catholic Church gave the Regeneration Group a long lease on the church in Princes Dock Street and the **parochial house** in Pilot Street in **2007**. The group has accessed some funding and slowly - the church building is being rescued as a centre for community activities. Terry McKeown welcomes visitors inside the church and outlines their vision for its future as a community hub.

On **St Patrick’s Day March 2021** they organised a global event from inside St Joseph’s Church. The musical celebration was streamed around the world - a massive achievement during COVID time, Brian Houston and Anthony Toner were amongst the performers.

## **WORK**

During the apex of shipbuilding, engineering and linen more than **2,000 men worked at the docks**. Wages were low and working conditions were harsh. Jobs were handed down from father to son.

Lenny Murphy’s Dad was a dock labourer from Fleet Street. Mary McAleese’s husband Martin had a student job as a casual docker.

Work for dockers was very casual, seasonal, sometimes dangerous and difficult for family men needing permanence.

## **The Strikes of 1907 - May and August**

Dockers, carters, boilermakers, transport workers and coal heavers were some of those who went on strike. Firemen, some factory workers and sailors joined in. The RIC mutinied and the strike was eventually defeated when the British army came down from North Queen Street Barracks to the docks and used force.

Soon the **Irish Transport and General Workers Union** was formed to protect workers' rights.

## **Schooling for low-dockers and cross-channel dockers**

Dockers lined up looking for a day's work in the morning and this was called schooling.

Standing on 'the half moon' meant that you were getting work that day.

The **low-dockers** collection place eventually moved from Dock Street and into the Harbour estate on the Dufferin Road - in a specially built shed. In **1972 decasualisation** was established. However at the same time workers experienced **a drastic reduction in their numbers**. The use of container transport was now well established. There were redundancy payments but it was an uncertain time for many men. Some would never work again.

The **Cross-Channel dockers** were also schooled in the open, at Corporation Square, just inside the harbour gates. When change came they moved into a multi-purpose building in Pilot Street. It was the very site of the old Mariners school – the haunted school that was part of their childhood ghost stories.

## **DREDGING WORK**

**"The men who came home for their tea"**. A particularly demanding job for men was 'dredging'.

**Dredging** meant shifting tons of red clay, blue sheets and brown clay from the basin floor so that vessels could access the dockside. The job became redundant in 1986 and many men were laid off after long service - 40 - 50 years for some.

## **SAILORTOWN IN THE MEDIA**

There was an **exhibition** of Sailortown in the MAC theatre in 2012.

**John Campbell** from York Street has written poems and stories about the broader area.

**Martin Lynch**, playwright, wrote his acclaimed play Dockers in 1981. He made sure the real life dockers came to see the play at the Lyric theatre.

**Anthony Toner**, songwriter and singer, had a major hit with Sailortown on his A Sky For Every Day album.

**Terry Bradley** and **Rita Duffy** - both artists - have created local scenes and have been celebrated for their work.

## **CHILDHOOD MEMORIES SHARED AT THE DOCKERS' CLUB**

When Sailortown people get together they remember what made Sailortown a different community. They talk about the sound of **ships' horns** on the water sending a request for tugboat assistance, then a horn response from the **tug pilots**. They recall cold mornings when mist came off the water and a cold wind whistled down Pilot Street. They talk about the constant rattle of the trains moving down Princes Dock Street. **New Year's Eve** meant ship horns blasting on the water alongside St. Joseph's bells – both ringing in a new year.

Gerry Gallaher lived at 43 New Andrew Street and he slept on the floor on a mattress called a "tick". He went to sea aged 14 years. This was not uncommon. Some children had to school half time and work on the docks half time in order to help the family survive.

Many children walked over to the very popular children's playground on Henry Street - but not on a Sunday!

There were constant invitation visits to the big ships newly arrived at the docks. There were farewell and welcome back parties for Dads and uncles and big brothers. Exotic food like pineapples - American comics - stories about the high seas - all appeared in Sailortown.

During the Second World War Earl Street had - on one corner - a large six foot high tank full of water. This water was to be used by firemen if a fire broke out anywhere on the Harbour Estate. Schoolchildren used the 'pond' to sail boats and although dirty - swim in during an occasional heatwave.

## SCHOOLS

At the bottom of Pilot Street was a Seamen's National school or the 'Mariners' as locals called it. It was abandoned and then became the focus of ghost stories especially at Halloween.

**Nelson Street** had a Church of Ireland primary school. During the Second World War the Nelson Street school was identified as a centre for evacuation of children.

**St Joseph's School** on **Earl Street** was used as a First Aid centre during World War Two. Miss Henry taught the girls at this school.

Joe Baker recounts his schooldays locally.

He attended St Patrick's Primary school for boys on North Queen Street.

**1955** - Bishop Mageean formally opened a **newly built** St Patrick's Primary School **still on North Queen Street**. The school was for boys and girls.

The catchment area included Sailortown, Half Bap, Unity Flats and New Lodge. Joe talks of many bomb scares when pupils were marched over to the Barracks ground opposite the Primary school. The school was built to accommodate 400 boys and 400 girls. There were two Traveller sites nearby. Temporary classrooms were needed to cope with high demand for this new build school.

In the same year **1955** Bishop Mageean formally opened a **new** Secondary school on the Antrim Road. It was St Patrick's Secondary school or Bearnageeha - at first for boys only.

## WORLD WAR 2

The Victorian **York Street Spinning Mill was** completely destroyed by the Easter 1941 bombs. The back wall fell onto Sussex Street - a cascade of bricks resulted in many casualties as homeowners died in their homes. The wall had been six storeys high and seventy five feet wide: 47 houses were destroyed.

The **Merchant Navy** had suffered many casualties in the Second World War. Fatalities may number about 32,000 men.

## SOME TROUBLES EVENTS

**Stephen Parker's** death is commemorated inside the Flying Angel Seafaring Mission on Prince's Dock St. This site may have once been a banana storehouse; nearby is St Joseph's Church. Stephen died in July 1972 in the Cavehill Road area whilst alerting afternoon shoppers to bombs on their street. At the time his father, a Presbyterian minister, was chief chaplain to the Seamen's Mission/Flying Angel Club - at that time based in Corporation Street.

In October **1972** two Catholic girls - **Paula Strong** and **Clare Hughes** - were killed outside the Ship Bar (sometimes called Benny's Bar) on Dock Street when a 100lb bomb planted by Loyalist terrorists exploded beside them. It was Halloween and they were playing on the street. Paula was six years old and Clare was four years old. The two funerals were held in St Joseph's church.

Benny's Café is now based round the corner on Short Street. Benny was the very popular manager of the Ship Bar. Joey Dunlop often ate breakfast there on his way home from the Port.

## NEIGHBOURING AREAS

Nearby were other working class communities like the **Alley** and **Little Italy** and **York Street** and **Half Bap**.

**Little Italy** was just outside Sailortown. The Catholic migrants mainly came from Cassalattico in southern Italy. Some worshipped at St Joseph's and some worshipped at St Patrick's Church on Donegall Street. Frank Carson's family attended St Patrick's Church.

Marconi, Forte, Fusco, Vergatti, Norarantonio, Morelli and Capitano were families living in **Little Patrick Street**.

**Nelson Street** was home to Pasquale, Dragonetti, Saclio and Martello families. Most of the Nelson Street men were listed as street musicians. With chain migration some Italian families soon moved into York Street.

### The Alley

Back Ship Street consisted of about 12 houses and this was the heart of the working class community of the Alley. **Buck Alec** or Alex Robinson lived there. He kept a pet lion in the back yard.

**Rinty Monaghan** flyweight world champion was from nearby - Little Corporation Street He died in 1984 aged 65 years. His most celebrated win was 23rd March 1948.

## PUBS

The **Majestic Bar** was at 34 Garmoyle Street and the owner was Owen Watters. On the same street there were seven pubs in the early 1900's.

**Brennan's Bar** premises on Prince's Dock Street was a legend in Sailortown during the Troubles. Patrick Brennan originally from Co Galway refused to surrender to the challenges of sectarian division, a local community now scattered around North Belfast and streets considered too dangerous at night. Pat's bar staff were loyal and welcoming: traditional music sessions entertained the customers. Pat died in January 2000 aged 85 and his son, Pat, took over the business. Pat's daughter Brid is an award winning actress - another family relations has been a Dublin cabinet minister.

The **Ship Bar** run by Benny Cogle was blown up by the same bomb that killed the two schoolgirls.

Joe Donnelly owned the **Rotterdam Bar**. The Rotterdam pub closed in 2010. The pub sign is on display inside the American Bar.

**The American Bar** is named because it was often the last stop for emigrants on their way to America.

**McKenna's bar** is now owned and being updated by Kelvin Collins. In a *Belfast Telegraph* article he said of his bar: "whatever it is will be of Sailortown. There's a lot of history there and we want to respect that."

## VISITORS TO SAILORTOWN

**James Connelly** took a big interest in this - the Dock Ward. He lived there at one time. Connelly contested the 1912 local elections - as a Labour candidate and - although defeated - managed a successful challenge to the usual breakdown of Unionist Nationalist voting. **Winifred Carney** was his secretary at the time.

**Jim Larkin** led the 1907 Belfast Strike and it all began in Sailortown.

In the Spring of 1962 **Sonny Liston** came to visit his friend Gerry McAllister in Dock Street. Sonny Liston was the heavyweight champion of the world. Gerry had trained with him in Chicago.