

## Background to the Linen Industry until 1960s

Earliest written record of linen in Ireland in 13th century monastic sources in the 17th century. The Earl of Stafford encouraged the growing of linen because England refused to take Irish wool. The North of Ireland welcomed 500 families of Huguenots. Landlords included **Lord Conway, Lord Hillsborough, Brownlows and the London Livery Companies** in the Coleraine area. In the early 19th century linen production moved from cottage to factory production and cotton was now supplanted by linen.

In the 1820's the **Mulholland** brothers cotton weaving factory in Belfast was burnt down. They changed to linen production.

**In 1831 there was one linen factory in the North? - By 1861 there were 32 factories - in places like Waringstown, Bessbrook, Sion Mills, Mossley / Muckamore, Shrigley, Drumaness, Milford, Donaghcloney, Upperlands and Edenderry.** These villages resembled the American 'Company' towns of United States. The expansion was fuelled by a good supply of swift flowing water and Scottish coal shipped in cheaply from across the water.

By 1913 York St Flax Spinning Company did spinning and weaving - J and TM Greeves did spinning and Milford Weavers did weaving. There was a revival of sorts during World War Two but man-made fibres dominated the 1960's and cheap Far East cotton became popular.

In the mid 1800's there were thousands of workers known as '**indoor hands**' - sewers and weavers employed in cottage industry in their own homes.

There was an **embroidery factory in Maghera**, Co L'derry managed by Hans Gabathular - a popular man who made Maghera his home. His son Erwin 1933 - 2016 was an eminent scientist on a global platform. Jacquard weaving started in France and reached Britain by the 1820's. In 1950's linen damask weaving became fully automated but power looms were not as good as handwoven. Handwoven items for the luxury market continued until the end of the 1960's.

## St Peter's Cathedral

The Cathedral is in the **Pound** area. It was built on land belonging to a County Carlow landlord - John Alexander. - hence Alexander Street West and Milford Street. **Barney Hughes** bought a perpetual lease on the area and in 1858 he transferred the land to

Bishop Denver for a peppercorn rent. It was the first Catholic Church in Ireland? the North to be built in the Gothic style. The build was slow eg some residents were relocated and fund raising was needed. The Cathedral was built of Strabo stone and the altar was Caen stone and Irish marble. There are seven magnificent arches propped up by beautiful pillars. There was an opening ceremony in 1866. The spires were built on top of the twin towers in 1885. **Father Convery** was a very popular priest here - 1882 - 1895 and during his time abstinence from alcohol was encouraged. When repairs were needed Clashan stone from Scotland was used. The Cathedral became a Pro-Cathedral.

### **Cardinal Conway**

A highlight occasion was the April 1965 visit from **Cardinal Conway** - Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All-Ireland. For Cardinal Conway it was an emotional return to his roots - he was a native of the parish.

### **The Troubles**

In July 1970 the Cathedral was forced to close for a brief time during the "Falls Curfew". The other challenges were internment in August 1971 and the Hunger Strikes in 1981.

### **The Church Bells**

The Cathedral bells were cast in Dublin. At midnight on Christmas Eve each year "**See Amid the Winter's Snow**" heralded the beginning of Christmas for the people of St Peter's parish. The carillon of chime bells are nine in number. Gunning and Cavanagh of Dundrum, Co Down - specialists in church bells and clock towers serviced the bells - they sold to Beltran and the business is still going- still in Dundrum. Today the bells are organised from a keyboard.

### **Barney Hughes**

He had moved to Belfast from Co Armagh. When he arrived there were two Catholic Churches - St Mary's on Chapel Lane - very overcrowded and St Patrick's church on Donegall Street. St Malachy's church in Alfred Street was built in 1884.

He decided that the Lower Falls needed their own church and was a loyal and generous friend to St Peter's Church. **He was present at the opening.**

## The Parish

At one time 54 pubs encircled the Cathedral - all have been demolished the last one in 1974. There was a vibrant, busy Boy Scouts Group based at the Cathedral. The Scout Troop has gone and the Troop flags are missing. The Cathedral would like them back.

## Albert Street

**Albert Street separated the Pound Loney from Lower Wack.** There was a shoemaker in Albert Street - Hughie Dorian. The Arcadian picture house was owned by Johnny Donnelly. Murphy's pub was at the junction of Albert Place and Albert Street. 'I'm going to my uncle's' meant 'I'm going to the pawn shop.' Adolf Haller was a German watchmaker who had a repair shop upstairs in his Albert Street home. Albert Street Presbyterian Church closed, was flattened and is now the Marie Sheenan Health Centre.

## Albert Street and Neighbours

Leo Lambe was a newsagent and tobacconist. McAleese was a pawnbroker. McAufield was a chemist. Malocca's was a Fish Saloon. Paddy Brennan was a pub owner and snugs were often called boxes. John Maguire from Cavan was a pub owner on Albert St. The rag and bone man gave you delph crockery in exchange for rags. A 'houseshop' sold sweets, candy apples, biscuits and milk from the home kitchen.

## Raglan Street

Raglan Street was long, straight and broad and therefore popular for church processional, political parades and meetings. Swinging on lampposts was against the law. The street was roughly surfaced with 'kidney pavers' the size of turnips. The footpaths or 'cribpaths' had a smaller type of 'kidney stone' the size of a duck egg. Police from three barracks locally - Springfield, Dover Street and Cullingtree - patrolled the area. The **Concreting of Raglan Street** was a memorable event. The term 'footpaths' now came into use. Children's games now changed - guiders were built out of old prams, roller skates appeared and games with marbles were played a lot.

## The Five Big Linen Mills

The Egyptians used linen cloth - the bodies of the Pharoahs were swathed in linen bandages. Flax was the only natural fibre grown in Europe. It was known as 'the poor

man's crop'. Linen took over from cotton. West Belfast had the Farset River and plenty of open space. Linen mills required four times as many operators as cotton mills with the same number of spindles. The five main mills were:

- **New Northern Spinning and Weaving Co. Ltd - 1 Falls Rd / Craig St.**
- **Greeves's and Kennedy's Mills - Falls Rd/Conway St.**
- **Ross's Mill - Clonard St / Odessa St.**
- **Milfort Mill - later Blackstaff Print Works - Springfield Rd.**
- **Springfield Spinning Mill - Springfield Rd.**

## **Life in the Mills**

### **Men**

Men in the mill were usually hecklers or roughers – it was skilled work but exhausting and very dirty. Some men were mechanics and some were heavy loaded trolley pushers or 'yarn hawkers'.

### **Children**

Up until the mid 1920's it was quite common for children under 14 years of age to work part-time in the mills. Many schools or schoolhouses were beside the mills and were owned by the church or mill owners. After a while half days were changed to alternate days. West Belfast MP Joe Devlin campaigned for the Rights of Children and the end of this employment. **In 1900 St Gall's school opened - also St Vincent's girls school - also St Finian's school.**

### **Generally**

Some people found employment as 'rapper-upper' or 'knocker-upper' making sure the workers got out of bed. The Redeemer Church at Clonard organised early morning Mass so that mill workers could attend Mass before going to work.

## **Local Foundries**

Local Foundries prospered during this industrial surge. Soho Foundry was on Townsend St - there was the James Mackie Foundry - also Coombe Barbour and Combe Foundry.

### **Robert Shipboy MacAdam – local entrepreneur and academic**

**Robert Shipboy MacAdam** is celebrated at Chulturlann as an Irish speaker, noted academic and a founding member of the **Gaelic League**. He was passionate about languages and reputed to be fluent in thirteen languages. His Foundry was on Townsend St - right beside the Presbyterian Church. There were seven other factories and Foundries on Townsend St. With his brother he started in 1820's iron and brass foundering. He devised a steam engine machine and it was very successful. Egypt relied heavily on this innovation when implementing an irrigation system for the River Nile. The **King of Egypt** came to Belfast to meet Robert Shipboy MacAdam. Robert's mother was a Shipboy from Coleraine. Robert was an Inst schoolboy - his academic papers are in the Central Library - he never married and died in 1895.

### **Slow Decline of the Linen Mills**

**At one time there were 200 mills in the North - by 1980 there were only 20. By 1950's York St Mill and Brookfield Mill had closed.**

### **Ross's Mill**

**Ross's Mill** on Clonard St started around 1850 by William Ross (1804-1871). The family had two factories in Belfast and one in Co Down. Dunlewey St is named after their estate in Co Donegal. They made a lot of money producing linen shirts for British soldiers during the Crimean War. **The Ross family home is now the Convent of Adoration on the Falls Rd.** Ross family members are buried at Hannahstown graveyard. New apartments have been built on the site of the mill.

### **Kennedy Family**

**The Kennedy's Falls Flax Spinning Mill Complex** was formed in 1865 and the Conway Mill section remains standing and open to visitors. The Kennedy family home was Clonard House - now sheltered housing and facing Clonard monastery. **Conway Mill was in the centre of a West Belfast linenopolis** - there were about fifteen other linen mills in the immediate area.

The Conway Mill updated its machinery in 1906 and 1913. The new machinery was made by James Mackie & Sons. The Falls Flax Spinning Company did reasonably well during the Second World War. In 1951 they converted to electricity following a grant from the Ministry of Commerce. Profits continued until 1966. In November 1976

Conway Mill manager Lionel Dawson closed the doors on Conway Mill Complex for the last time.

### **Housing Conditions for the Workers**

Where to house the workers needed in the mills? Evidence from papers stamped in 1865 indicates one solution. Lord Donegall had died in 1850 and subsequent sale of his lands in West Belfast provided the Kennedy family with an opportunity to buy 32 local houses for their workers.

Many of these local houses were established before 1866. Health was not good. 'Pounce' was the local name for a lung disease due to poor ventilation systems that failed to remove flax dust from the air. Many females suffered skin complaints. Child workers were exhausted, ill-nourished and their education was inadequate. These old houses were a mixture of **kitchen** houses and **parlour** houses two up and two down. They were similar in area and street frontage. Parlour houses had a sitting room or parlour on the ground floor with a kitchen behind the parlour. The front door of kitchen houses opened straight into kitchens which had a room behind it that served as a third bedroom.

Many houses had no back door so front doors were where people had to carry coal bags in and domestic stuff out. There was no running water. The Falls Rd Baths opened in 1896 – a much needed benefit to all.

**All that remains of this identity is - Conway Mill - Dunville St - Lower Clonard St - Falls Library - Dunlewey St and the Convent of Adoration.**

### **Notes taken from**

- The Making of Irish Linen by Peter Collins
- St Peter's 1866 - 2005 - library book
- Memories of Raglan Street by Jimmy Webb
- The Rise and Fall of West Belfast Mills 2006 by Olive Maguire
- The Road – Memories of the Falls by Robin Livingstone