

The Harp Area: A Potted History

In the second century a 'royal road', one of the five great roads of Ireland, stretched from Tara in Meath to Glendalough in Wicklow, crossing the river Liffey at the Ford of the Hurdles (near the present-day Church Street Bridge). This road was known in Gaelic as *Bothar-na-gCloch*, or 'Road of the Stones' and was subsequently changed to *Stoney-Bothar* and later again corrupted to 'Stoneybatter'. In the Middle Ages this name transcended its road meaning and gradually began to refer to the area covering the old Viking settlement of Oxmantown or *Ostmantown* (town of the man from the east).

Oxmantown had evolved as a separate village from Dublin, trading extensively in livestock and agriculture, linked by the river and the ancient 'royal road' to the country. For over a millenium this north-west frontier of the city served as a major market and trading site. When the Vikings, or more correctly the Hiberno-Norse, were building a town it was traditional for them to retain a green area - they did this at Oxantown Green.

The latter part of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century was a period of considerable growth for the area. By 1660 Oxmantown became residential with wealthy people living around the Green. In 1664 a highway, Queen Street, and a major cattle market at Smithfield were established. These, coupled with the opening of the Royal Barracks to the west in 1704 ensured that area was a bustling district throughout the eighteenth century, filled with shops, markets, hotels and traders.

The land to the east originally formed part of St. Mary's Abbey but had come under secular control following the collapse of the monasteries in 1530. In 1672 Sir Humphrey Jervis bought 20 acres of the area and laid it out into four main streets - Capel Street, Jervis Street, Abbey Street and Mary Street, bestowing a modern urban form to the area. The next major development was again eastwards when in 1714 Luke Gardiner bought the Moore holding consisting of other parts of St. Mary's Abbey and laid down Moore Street, Henry Street and Drogheda Street (O'Connell Street North) amongst others. The area was very affluent, with a largely Protestant population.

Fortunes took a turn for the worse from the start of the nineteenth century onwards, and the north of the city experienced serious decline. A couple of major developments conspired to bring about this unfortunate situation:

1. Following the Act of Union (1801), the demise of the political infrastructure of the city alongside the reduction in military presence meant that the area was abandoned both socially and economically.
2. The huge migration of people in the late nineteenth century from the hinterlands seeking work put huge pressure on the existing housing stock and the area's fine houses gradually fell into tenement use.

The latter prompted the establishment of the Dublin Artisan Dwelling Company (DADC) that helped alleviate the great housing distress of the skilled working classes at least. Their work can still be seen today in the rows of artisan dwellings in Stoneybatter.

The beginning of the twentieth century was a prosperous enough time for the markets in the area with increased commercial activity due in large measure to the expanded contingent of British soldiers in the local barracks. But from the 1920s on, a pall of economic hardship characterised by high unemployment, emigration, poverty and hunger descended on the area as the rural-based economy of the markets began to falter. Livestock trading declined and horse dealing suffered from the advent of the motor industry. Even the noxious industries such as soap, tallow and fish processing, which had rendered the area undesirable for the wealthy, closed down or laid off workers.

The post-war situation was marginally better as socio-economic state benefits increased: Flat complexes were built, such as O'Devaney Gardens in the north-west sector, altering the social and economic composition of the area by bringing in lower-income families. Then, in the final quarter of the last century, the collapse of more major employers such as Jameson's Distillery, the cattle market and the abbatoir compounded the area's problems. The northwest of the inner city became a forbidding and desolate area, bereft of its traditional market and industrial functions, with an increasingly marginalised and long-term unemployed populace.

Yet as with many of Dublin's inner-city areas this litany of hardship and deprivation failed to destroy, and indeed in many respects further galvanised, the long established community spirit of the HARP area.