

ST GEORGE'S MARKET – THE HUB OF ULSTER?



Belfast's City Market runs every Friday, Saturday and Sunday and it certainly is a hub of activity. Each day has a slightly different focus with Saturday being the big day for fresh produce. Local crafts, artwork and cottage industries are all well represented and this is why I see its potential to develop as the central hub, the focal point, the catalyst for a revolutionary approach to solving the economic woes of our country. Our government officials, politicians, and media experts seem to have all attended the same advanced school of economics. They all seem to sing from the same hymn sheet that glorifies foreign investment, the hymn sheet that preaches doom unless we can bring in the big global companies. I didn't attend that school so I just don't understand the rationale behind their strategies. I do understand that foreign investment can, on some occasions, create jobs and can thereby more than justify the cost involved in luring them in. In my school of thought however, it would seem more beneficial for our government to invest in and develop a local entrepreneur-based sustainable economy. It is not all that long ago that we produced the bulk of our food, clothing, footwear and household needs. Nowadays

the vast majority of our needs come from places very far away and so little wonder then there is growing unemployment. People had to work hard in those days, but it was honest work and all but the physically ill and criminals were at it. It may not sound very revolutionary to talk about going back to those days but considering how the global economy now operates, Northern Ireland and our neighbours, could with a wee bit of imagination and foresight find ourselves at the cutting edge. I can say this with some confidence and optimism after spending a bit of time at St George's in recent weeks. This market is full of creative thinking entrepreneurs, who are obviously successful to some degree or else they wouldn't be renting a stall every week. Many of them have other aspects of their business that they operate elsewhere but most will say that the market also serves as their primary source of advertising.

The problem I came up against though, when undertaking to do a feature on the market, is that there are just too many interesting stalls and so many characters that I only had time over the three days to talk to a small portion of them. What also comes across is that there are lots of regulars who go shopping at St George's and you get the feeling that they are there for the crack as much as the quality local goods that are on offer.

I have a fair understanding of how markets such as this work. For a six year period in Canada, my wife and I operated a stall at the Halifax Farmers Market in Nova Scotia. We sold organic vegetables, before it was sexy, flowers and herbs. We worked all week preparing for the Saturday market and got up at 4:00 am on the Saturday morning as we lived 90 miles away from the city. We arrived there at 6:00 am and quickly set about unloading our packed van to get set up in advance of 7:00 am, as we knew that crowds would be queuing outside to get in as soon as the gates opened to the public. While our young daughter slept underneath our stall, hidden in a makeshift bed, we were bombarded with customers for about a three hour period. Our daughter, now in her late twenties still talks fondly in reminiscence of those somewhat surreal but magical Saturday mornings. Although the market went on until after 1:00 pm, we were usually sold out of the bulk of our produce by 10:00 am, and nothing ever went to waste as a few local restaurants were very glad to get quality local produce at a slightly reduced price. That market day was basically my wage packet for the week. There was more to it than that though. There was a strong social scene and all kinds of connections were made. I was also involved, on a voluntary basis, in the organising of folk nights in our nearby village of Margaretsville at the time. Because of the market we were able to get people to travel from the city to those folk nights on a regular basis. Several musicians that we heard perform at the market got hired to perform at the folk nights and I got the occasional music gig myself from contacts made at the market: the Ulster Scottish Society of Canada was formed in 1994 as a result of initial connections made at that market. I know I've gone off on a rant talking about another market in another country, but it's all to emphasise the point that St George's is a very similar set-up and no doubt already is a focal venue for the gathering of like minds, as well as a provider of quality local products. More on this notion later.

As far as produce goes, St George's has a selection of everything local and seasonal on offer. There are vegetables and fruits, cheeses, breads, naturally-reared and processed meats and a huge choice of seafood. There is a fair bit of organic produce available but perhaps not on the same scale as markets elsewhere. The artwork and crafts are of a quality that suggests a strict vetting system. The market on any day of the week is huge and unfortunately we are only able to highlight a small sample of the traders in this issue of The Ulster Folk. We'll just have to keep going back. Highlights of purchases on a recent Saturday visit were venison steaks, coffee packaged in Upperalands, a solar-powered razor and a pumpkin-seeded wheatan loaf; the best I've tasted in a long, long time.

'BRIGHT LIGHTS BIG CITY' REV DOC & MARK BEESTING BRAIDNER



Doc & Mark at St. Georges Market

The much covered Jimmy Reed Blues standard has been chosen as the title track of the new cd by the Reverend Doc and Mark 'Beesting' Braidner. Doc who is from Scotland started playing with Mark just over two years ago at the Warrenpoint 'Blues On The Bay' Festival after Doc's Band - The Congregation - were unable to make it over. Their collaboration proved so successful that they have since played many gigs together with Doc, whose influence is Chicago Blues, providing vocals and harmonica and Mark whose influence is 'country blues' providing vocals and an eclectic range of guitar styles and percussion. There has been very little 'tweaking' to the sound which is great because what you are getting is a live performance without the usual clamour of the audience. Included in the well chosen 12 tracks are a couple of Robert Johnson numbers (Travelling Riverside Blues & Walkin' Blues) and Muddy Waters' 'Honey Bee'. This is a fabulous Blues cd to get you into the groove and presently it can be purchased at No Alibis Bookstore on Botanic Avenue, Belfast. Rev Doc and Mark Braidner can be found playing in a number of venues around Belfast, recently I had the opportunity to see them playing in St George's Saturday Market where they kept the shoppers and market traders entertained from 10.30am until 2.30pm. Their relaxed informal sets lend to shopping at a very leisurely pace and taking time out to have a cuppa. Mark Braidner can also be heard playing solo gigs and gigs with his band around Belfast, Bangor and Carrickfergus. *by Ann Henry*



PHEASANT'S HILL FARM



Alan of Pheasants' Hill Farm is one of the star characters at the market. I had met Alan before when he was in his capacity as chef at his stall at an event at Mount Stewart. At that event he was entertaining his customers who were purchasing his burgers made from the free range rare breeds on his farm near Killyleagh. When I caught up with him at St George's he once again busy entertaining his, mostly female, customers with humorous banter. I did manage to find a moment to purchase a couple of venison steaks. He quipped that he hoped I drank, as his venison required washing down with a good bottle of red wine. I replied, "Well to be honest, the only reason why I'm buying this stuff is so as I can have an excuse to go out and buy a bottle of good red wine." To be really honest though, after tasting the venison I will soon be buying another bottle of good red wine so that I can have an excuse to buy more venison. Apart from the fact that Alan is indeed a character and his produce is of the highest quality, there is even more of interest. He is obviously an entrepreneur with an eye for creativity and diversity, the sort of role model our sad economy in Northern Ireland needs right now. *All will be revealed in The Ulster Folk soon.*

ST. GEORGE'S MARKET



PADDY LYNN

One of the first characters that I met up with at the market recently was Paddy Lynn, and no better man to be asking about the ins and outs and the history of St Georges. Paddy explained that he was of the McCabe and Boyle tribe who are 3rd generation market traders and hence his wealth of knowledge. He was full of descriptive tales of market days gone by; of horses, cattle and sheep; of travellers, tinkers and eccentric traders. There was even a tale of a character with a connection to the market who sold the Queens Bridge to an American. He didn't own the bridge and so was absent from the market for a few years as they stuck him in jail. I got the sense that there was probably no end to Paddy's tales but it was hard to have a decent conversation as people kept asking him the price of the antiques he was selling. He was doing a roaring trade. Having been raised in the

business, Paddy obviously takes the market life very seriously, even if it hard to take some of his yarns seriously: he is an executive board member of the National Market Traders Association.

IRISH LINEN



The sign above Herman Baur's stall announces, "Irish Linen Back on Belfast Market". There is a lot of information in those few words. On the one hand it is great news that Irish Linen is back at the market, but it also highlights the sorry state of affairs that one of our proud industries that once employed thousands almost became extinct. Once upon a time the flax was grown, harvested, scutched, spun and woven on Ulster ground; and the linen end-product was manufactured and artistically embroidered etc into quality clothing, table cloths, bed-clothes, and tea-towels etc. Irish Linen was renowned the world over. It was once such a key element to the "fabric" of our country that a distinct art-form known as Weaver Poetry developed in Antrim and Down in the nineteenth century. The decline of the industry began when they discovered that the dirty work of cultivating the flax could be done cheaper in poor East European countries. In fact, come to think of it, that was probably the

first move in the trend to suck us into a globalised economic structure that eventually would strip us of our distinct identity, our ability to be self-reliant. This could well have been the pivotal action that led us to be in the situation where our quality of life is now dependant on the activity and needs of multi-billionaires from far away places. What is particularly intriguing about this sign at St George's Market is that it is above the stall of Hermann Baur - a German. It is so common for people from outside a country to appreciate the richness of that country; and to see what it has lost when the local people can't see it themselves.

Hermann and his German wife Marion, who studied at the University of Ulster, have restored a disused Linen Mill near Dungiven where they are among the last in this country to weave and finish Linen products. We need to be grateful to them for having the initiative to preserve one of our traditional cottage industries, to preserve part of our cultural heritage. Hermann and Marion also work with other natural products such as wool and mohair. This is one of the discoveries at the Belfast Market that needs further exploration. *Look out for it in Issue 6 of The Ulster Folk.*



MUSICIANS AT MARKET

Folk, blues and jazz musicians provide idyllic ambience at the market. In a central area there are coffee tables where coffee and a wide choice of delicious snacks purchased from the stalls can be savoured while being entertained. The music seems a crucial element and undoubtedly enhances the market atmosphere. The performers that I have experienced at the market in recent times all seem to have a relaxed approach to their performance which allows for interaction and even participation. It's hard to imagine the market without the vibration of the music almost drowning out the constant sound of conversation and banter.



Friday Variety Market

Delicious, fresh, local produce at market prices.
Every Friday 6am-2pm.

Saturday City Food and Garden Market

Indulge yourself at dozens of local and continental food stalls.
Every Saturday 9am-3pm.

Sunday Food, Craft and Antique Market

Great food, crafts, art, antiques, oils, spices, chutneys, live music and much more.
Every Sunday 10am-4pm.



Extra market opening days

St George's Market will be opening six extra days in the run-up to Christmas:

Monday 12 December	10am - 4pm
Tuesday 13 December	10am - 4pm
Wednesday 14 December	10am - 4pm
Monday 19 December	10am - 4pm
Tuesday 20 December	10am - 4pm
Wednesday 21 December	10am - 4pm



BIG HAMMER PRODUCTIONS

Carnlough man Brendan Cosgrove is an essential element at any successful market. He's got the look, he's got rhythm, he's got the crack and he has a quality product. A former welder, Brendan told me he took to the more dainty profession of producing decorative metalwork, mostly for practical purposes, about four years ago. I've no doubt he does a roaring trade at this market; and even if he didn't the Belfast City Council would probably pay him just to be there.



ROBERT YOUNG

Carrick artist Robert Young is a big hit with locals and visitors alike. His artistic portrayals of classic Ulster scenes clearly strike a chord with a lot of people. I was particularly impressed with his centre piece display of The Titanic, Slemish Mountain and Goliath at Harland and Wolff Shipyard. I wondered if he saw me coming.



Please note the Planetarium is closed on Sundays. Pre-booking is essential.

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CHRISTMAS CRAFT FAIR AT ST GEORGE'S FRIDAY 2ND UNTIL SUNDAY 4TH DECEMBER

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